

A BROKEN LILY



By

MRS MORTIMER COLLINS



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BY

MRS. MORTIMER COLLINS

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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A BROKEN LILY.

CHAPTER I.

“PET!” said the Squire at breakfast the next morning, “as you were such a naughty girl yesterday, I’m going to punish you to-day by taking you up to town with me. I broke the mainspring of my watch last night, and I should like to get it mended before I start with Ackerman on Saturday, so I shall go up at once.”

“What a delightful punishment!” said Fanny.

“It’s a punishment to me, at any rate,”

said the Squire, "for I hate London, but I never trust my watch to the Abington folk. I've never broken a mainspring for years. I can't think how I was so careless."

"There's several little things you might bring down for Thursday night, if you will," said Fanny.

"Now, Fanny," said the Squire, "none of your nonsense! I know what you are in the way of loading a fellow with brown paper parcels, if he'll only give you a chance. No, thank you! You know you were to get up these festivities only on condition that I was not to be bothered, and now you want to make a porter of me."

"Well, Pet may get just one or two things, mayn't she?"

"No, no, Fan! I know what one or two things mean. She'll have to tramp in and out the drapers' shops to try and

match some wretched bit of ribbon that costs sixpence when it's found, eh?"

"I *did* want a little bit of stuff matched, for there's not a bit like it in Abington, and it's very tiresome of you, Thorn, for I shan't be going to London again before I'm married now."

"Well, Fanny," said Pet, "I must say I think you take more trouble to match a bit of ribbon than I do to find out the difference between a hedge-warbler and a female robin."

"Oh, Miss Pet! You're going to retort on me, are you? It seems to me my lecture did some good yesterday, considering what very good spirits somebody is in this morning."

Pet was certainly much happier than she had been for a long time. Perhaps there was just a little touch of triumph over Fanny in her tone this morning; but this was excusable considering how

Fanny had lectured her for some weeks past. She felt that she had once more got the confidence of the man who was her idol, who was all the world to her. There was no fear of anyone coming in between them—at least not yet. Fanny could say what she liked now. She was sure it was all right. And now she was to spend the greater part of the day with her father, the first day so spent for several weeks. So she started in excellent spirits, looking radiant and happy notwithstanding her many hours' cry of the day before.

“Dear Papa!” she said taking his hand when the carriage had started, “I shall have nearly a whole day with you. That’s so nice!”

“Do you like being with me better than anyone else, Pet?”

“Oh, yes! And I’ve seen so little of you lately.”

“But it will do you good to be with Miss Courtley, darling ; you want a woman to take care of you.”

“No, I don’t, papa. I don’t want any-one but you.”

“But you like Miss Courtley?”

“Yes, ever so much ; but not as much as Cousin Bart and Mr. Ackerman. They’re second best and third best, you know. Fanny says Cousin Bart ought to marry Miss Courtley, papa !”

“Fanny’s a regular match-maker. She doesn’t know whom Cousin Bart *did* want, eh, little one?”

“I hope he isn’t thinking about it still, papa. I try to make him understand, you know !”

“Dear old boy ! I’m sure he’d never bother you again unless you gave him leave. He’s so conscientious. I’ve told him to take care of you while I’m away.”

“Do you think you shall stay *very* long?”

“It will depend on circumstances. I can’t fix anything definitely.”

When they reached the station they saw Miss Sophia Green wandering about.

“Oh, papa!” said Pet; “don’t let us see her if we can help it, because she’ll get into the same carriage, and she does say such horrid things to me.”

“Don’t fear. I’ll take care we’re not in the same carriage.”

But they need not have taken any trouble in the matter, for Miss Green was more anxious to avoid them than they could be to ignore her. She kept carefully out of the way, and flattered herself that she entered unseen into a carriage at some distance.

When the train reached Paddington, the Squire was again anxious to leave without encountering the woman he dis-

liked so much; so he told Pet to keep still while he watched her off the platform.

“Why, she’s got a most extraordinary-looking man to meet her,” said the Squire; “and they’re looking quite affectionately at one another.”

“Let me see, papa. Oh, what a dreadful man!”

“He’s very unlike any of the Green family. I shall begin to think that the old lady’s got a little romance of her own. What news it will be for Fanny!”

“Oh, won’t it?” said Pet, laughing. “And just look at them going away in a hansom together!”

“That’s the oddest-looking couple I’ve seen for a long time!” said the Squire. “Why, I should think the man was a card-sharper, or something of that sort!”

Captain Carstairs had not improved in appearance since his former meeting with

Miss Green. He was falling back into his old ways, and for the last few days had had a drinking fit, during which he had quarrelled with Mrs. Carey, and threatened all sorts of things if she did not give him more money. He had stood at the door late one night knocking and shouting after the household were in bed, and she was obliged to let him in rather than have a disturbance in "such a very genteel street," as she called it.

When Miss Green wrote to inform him that she should go up to town on a certain day by a certain train, he had sense enough to try and get himself into condition. But the bloodshot eyes had not time to clear, and the trembling hands would not steady themselves as they were stretched out to help the fair lady alight from the railway-carriage.

"Now this is too kind!" said Miss Green, when they were seated in the

hansom, "to take the trouble to meet the train. I thought perhaps I should have seen you in Bond Street at the time I mentioned."

"The honour and pleasure are mine," said the Captain in a husky voice. "I hope you are well."

"Very well, thank you ; and you ?"

"Alas ! I have a severe cold, which affects my eyes and voice, as you will perceive : indeed, I feel anything but well."

"Dear me ! I hope you have good medical advice ?"

"Ah, my dear Miss Green ! we poor people have to do the best we can for ourselves when we're ill. *Once* I could count on the very best advice ! In fact one of our great medical luminaries was a most intimate friend. But now ! Alas ! dear lady, we lose our friends when we're poor. It is only angels like yourself that will condescend to look on a poor man."

The proximity of the couple in the cab was again an opportunity that the Captain made the most of. In the ten minutes' drive that was required to take them to their destination, the Captain had played his cards so well that he had managed to extract a couple of five-pound notes from his companion.

Miss Green, who certainly did not waste too much money in dress, though she had smartened up wonderfully in the last fortnight, had a little store of money which she had been saving up for years. Her present visit to town was made solely to find out the secret which the Captain had hinted at, though perhaps the pleasure of being again *tête-à-tête* with the Captain was not lost sight of. His poverty had been so urged upon her, both by letter and at the previous interview, that she felt it would not be out of place to lay him under an obligation to her by offer-

ing money. It was with a pang that she unlocked her stores and supplied herself with the two notes; but still there was a great deal to be done with them. Her temper had been gradually rising since the invitations to the party at Overton Hall had been sent out. Notwithstanding her assertion that she should not think of going, she was evidently very much annoyed at not being asked.

When Miss Green was annoyed it was proverbial with some of her friends, or rather enemies, that she went about looking black in the face. According to Fanny Broderick she had been "looking as black as thunder" for some days, and was meditating a dreadful revenge. Fanny was perhaps not far wrong.

Miss Green suspected Captain Carstairs was really the father of the girl who now reigned as mistress at Overton Hall, and she looked forward with fierce delight to

throwing the news like a bombshell into the village. The non-invitation to the party quite determined her. She was in a perfect state of fury.

“I think,” said Miss Green to the Captain, when she had made some pretence of shopping, “that a little luncheon might do you good. A cold is so very lowering; and I think after some warm food with a good glass of wine, you might perhaps feel better.”

“You are too thoughtful,” said the Captain. “But pray do not allow me to tax your thoughtfulness too much. I daresay I shall be better soon. Your charming society is far more efficacious than any medicine. I am aware that food is a great help to the vital powers. In fact it has always been one of my favourite theories that food is better than medicine.”

“Yes, I quite agree with you. I always

tell my poor people that they'd better spend their money on food than on the doctor."

"Very good advice! very! What a blessing you must be to them! I can assure you it's astonishing how much the dumb creatures do for us if we only believe in them. There's the turtle! What would invalids do without it? See the goodness of a benign Providence in creating such an animal to restore our lost energies! Then the oyster! Think what there is in the oyster! Why, as I've often remarked I think if I were dying, a few natives would cure me, though they *must* be natives; the others are too coarse for anything but cooking. They came in last month by the way, and I've not tasted them yet. Then the partridge! A nice plump partridge! There's nothing to equal it in game for an invalid. But I daresay you get more partridges than you

like, Miss Sophia, for I suppose your father shoots?"

"We have a few," said Miss Green, who did not care to acknowledge that her father had been past shooting for many years.

"That's so nice to have one's own. You get the pick and choice, and are not obliged to put up with the old birds. I have lived on the very best food in my time, Miss Sophia, but—ah, well! we won't talk of anything sad!"

"I'm sure it will do you good to take something now. Gentlemen are always so much better for their food——"

"Now, Miss Sophia, that's a truly noble sentiment! Most women blame us for liking good things; they call us very ugly names sometimes, and say we are selfish; but you! well, I declare, I never met a lady before, and I have known many, who gave a thought to our wants. None but

your charming self could be so thoughtful."

"If you will name the place, for of course you understand that sort of thing better than I do, and order whatever pleases you, I shall be very glad to join you, and hope you will consider my purse at your disposal to defray the expenses."

"Now that's very gracefully done, dear Miss Sophia! You do not forget that I am poor, but you will not allow me to remember it! Charming! upon my word!"

"Do you know of a nice quiet place where everything is good, and where we can get a little chat?"

The Captain mentioned a well-known restaurant in the West End, and thither they presently repaired.

Having ordered a luncheon that only a rich man or a man having another person's money to spend would dream of, the jaunty, rakish, dissipated Captain

Carstairs and his lugubrious companion arranged themselves at one of the many small tables.

“So sorry you don’t like oysters,” he said presently, when greedily devouring some delicate natives. “I wish I could persuade you just to take one, only one ! Let me prepare it with a squeeze of lemon-juice, and the least little dash of pepper. There now ! try that, it’s a morsel for a prince, or rather a princess, to whom it is offered. No ? Well really I’m very sorry you won’t, for you lose such a pleasure by not liking oysters. But you ladies live on air ; and we poor unlucky men want something more substantial. But you’ll take a glass of Montrachet just to keep me in countenance in this course, won’t you now ?”

“Not if we have champagne to follow, thank you. I think you said champagne ! I’ll reserve myself for that.”

“We’re too prudent, dear Miss Sophia, we really are. I must give you a lesson in eating and drinking.”

“I’m contented with very little,” said the lady.

“But you should not be, you really should not! How delicious they are! You possess that rare quality—very rare indeed in women, Miss Sophia—of sympathizing with a man’s personal wants. I have known some ladies who expect a man to live on love. Now love is very nice in its way; but how much nicer when one has not only a charming woman for companion,” waving his hand towards Miss Green, “but a charming little dinner as well! It’s truly delightful. This is a fine glass of wine—a very fine glass—such bouquet! do you catch it?” placing the glass near her nose. “Just sip it to make it sweeter, you know!”

“Goodness gracious me!” said Miss

Green, putting the glass down suddenly.

“What is it? who is it?” said the Captain, following her eyes. At the entrance to the room stood the Squire and Pet, both of them arrested with astonishment at the little scene before them.

“Why, Pet!” said the Squire.

“Papa!” said Pet.

Neither seemed to be able to find words.

“Let’s go away somewhere else, papa!”

“No, no, child! I’m curious for once in my life. Follow me!”

He walked to a table some little distance from the couple, and bowed as he caught Miss Green’s eye. She bowed somewhat stiffly in return, and nodded to Pet.

“Who is it?” said the Captain.

“Mr. Meadows and the girl,” said Miss Green in a whisper.

“What a sweet girl she has grown!” said the Captain with a sigh.

“Oh, papa, what an awful-looking man he is! How can she sit so near to him? Do look at his eyes, and how he’s staring at us,” said Pet, dropping her eyes.

“What a strange thing for Miss Green to be friendly with such a man!” said the Squire; “and they must be on very friendly terms to judge from what we saw when we came in. This is really quite amusing, Pet! But I hope the poor thing isn’t being victimized by the man! It looks rather like it.”

“It breaks my heart,” said the Captain, as he squeezed the lemon into his last oyster, “to think that I can’t go and claim my lawful rights over that beautiful girl. Look at her now!” he swallowed the oyster with a gusto that by no means betokened a breaking heart; “look at her, I say! talking as familiarly with that man as if he were her own father; and I sit

here—I who—but never mind! and she doesn't even know me."

"Oh, papa!" said Pet, do let me go and sit on the other side of the table, for that dreadful man frightens me. I shall dream about him, I know I shall. Aren't his eyes dreadful?"

"She has moved her seat," said the Captain. "She recognises me, but doesn't want to know me. Ungrateful child! But what can I expect? She lives in luxury. She doesn't want to know poor relations."

"But she ought to," said Miss Green, severely. "I've no patience with her putting on all those airs and graces. I should go openly and speak to her."

"Not yet, not yet! I could not command my feelings. I want to see her in private. Ah! dear Miss Sophia, if you knew my longing to speak to her once more, to embrace her, though she is so

ungrateful, you would try and give me the opportunity. You could do it if anyone could, for you have the heart and will to be kind! you are so charmingly kind to everyone!”

“Do you mean that you want to see her alone?”

“Yes, it would be better so; for others would prejudice her against me. Besides, I might tell to her what need never be told to anyone else, unless she wishes it.”

“Not to me, Captain Carstairs?” said Miss Green, with an expression that she intended for archness.

“Dear Miss Sophia! How can I tell you? How can I bring my lips to utter it while I am looking in your pure face? How can I speak of my own shame?” He leered at her with the bloodshot orbs, and she modestly looked down at the table-cloth.

“They seem to be enjoying themselves at any rate,” said the Squire. “Oysters to begin with, and now there are cutlets and champagne on the table. Miss Green will be getting lively presently.”

“And, waiter,” said the Captain, “see that there’s breadcrumbs with the partridge! breadcrumbs *and* bread-sauce! I like both. Now, dear Miss Sophia, let me assist you to a cutlet. That’s a nice little delicate one, like yourself. Tomato sauce? No? Dear me, that’s a pity! so wholesome, you know. As I was saying just now, I feel that, if ever I could confide in any woman, I could confide in you. But even you, good and charitable as you are, the most charitable of your sex—you will not forgive me, I fear! Capital cutlets these! quite the best house I know for a little snack of this sort!”

“Won’t you trust to my forgiveness, Captain?”

“Can I? Can I hope that you will forgive a fault which in the eyes of your charming sex is considered to be a most unpardonable crime? Pledge me your word, dear lady, pledge it in a glass of champagne,” taking up his glass, “that you’ll not condemn me when——”

“Hush!” said Miss Green, motioning to him to put down his glass. “Don’t do anything of that sort, because *they* may be watching, and they’ll think it odd.”

“Ever prudent! Always prudent! We men are so headstrong. We forget appearances when we have a pair of bright eyes shining on us. But women! they are the guiding stars of our existence. They don’t let their feelings carry them away, they know when to put the veto—when to draw the line.”

“At any rate, they should,” said Miss Green, tossing her head, “but some forget themselves.”

“Ah! and then what becomes of us poor weak creatures who depend on them? Yes, Miss Sophia, you are right, as you always are! You have exactly hit the mark. Still I blame myself; I blame myself; I don’t want to exonerate myself in your eyes; I am ready to take all blame, and throw myself on your mercy!”

“How that man does eat!” said the Squire; “and talk, too! One would think he was making an offer of marriage to the old lady, he seems so confidential.”

“Perhaps he is, papa! What fun if Miss Green marries after all! I hope she won’t bring that dreadful man down to Overton if she does marry him. I’m sure I should faint from fright if I met him out alone.”

“And now look, Pet! they’re having partridge! Really I think they’re doing very well, especially as Miss Green always

pretends to live on nothing. You'd better chaff her about her lunch and her friend, when next you see her."

"No, I shall leave Fanny to do that."

"I believe that wicked Fan would thoroughly enjoy this."

"What a pity she didn't come!"

"Yes; it would have given her something to occupy her mind with for a long time. I am afraid we shall not see the end of the fun, for they are evidently intent on several courses; and I don't care to stay in this odour of many dishes longer than I can help."

"An excellent bird!" said the Captain, who had suspended conversation for a short time while he enjoyed the partridge; "very excellent! never tasted a better. No treat to you, I'm afraid, Miss Sophia; but a pleasure to you to see me enjoying it! I'm sure it is now! Game is a very nourishing food for delicate constitutions,

and I, alas ! am not as strong as I used to be. I was once kept well supplied by various friends and relations ; but no one thinks of me now."

"I shall be very pleased to send you a little occasionally," said Miss Green, who knew she would have to buy it, for what little shooting there was at Reedlands had been let to a richer neighbour for some years.

"Our friends there seem interested in us," said the Captain, "they are looking this way."

"I don't want to leave before they do," said Miss Green, who did not care to pass over her purse to her companion in the sight of Mr. Meadows.

"They seem to be moving already ; they have not given much time to the consideration of lunch. Ah ! dear me ! must I lose sight of that beautiful girl again ? Sweet child !" He kissed the

tips of his fingers towards her as she turned with her back to him to follow her father out.

“Never mind,” said Miss Green, “you shall see her again. Only if I’m to interfere in any way, Captain Carstairs, you must place your whole confidence in me. Pray don’t let me compromise myself in any way, for——”

“My dearest lady, not for the world ! not for the world !”

“You see, unless I know all I shall be as it were acting in the dark. It is in one sense rather unfortunate that I have been seen with you to-day, for it mixes me up in the matter ; but——”

“Dear Miss Sophia has courage, and she has done me the honour to offer me her friendship ; she will not be afraid to stand by me in what is lawful and right, eh ?”

“If you will confide in me, Captain

Carstairs, you will have no cause to regret it; but until you do, I can scarcely give an opinion in the matter."

"Then now that our friends have taken their departure, my sweet friend will pledge me in a glass of champagne, to be merciful—to forgive the fault of one who was more sinned against than sinning—to draw a veil of compassion over the modest blushes that rise at the confession of a weeping penitent: for I weep in heart, Miss Sophia! Pledge me with your glass—and with your eyes." Miss Green held out her glass to touch the Captain's, and after looking in his face for a moment, modestly dropped her eyes.

"Can you imagine," went on the Captain, in the most sentimental tone, "that a lady once did me the honour to fall in love with me?"

Having now drunk a pint of Montrachet, and the best part of a quart of

champagne, the Captain was rising to the occasion. Miss Green admired him more than ever in this mood ; and she was herself, after a couple of glasses of champagne, more lively than she was wont to be. She had been a little embarrassed at the appearance of Mr. Meadows, at the same time she had been also a little elated at showing off her friend ; for she could not but imagine that Captain Carstairs was a handsome and fashionable-looking man. It was entirely a new sensation to her to be taking luncheon alone with a gentleman who professed to admire her. His drivelling small talk was to her like brilliant wit. She fancied that all the world must join her in admiring this man ; and must also envy her his company. Mr. Meadows might perhaps make a little mischief out of it, she thought ; but then it really would be so romantic to have it talked about. And that odious Fanny

Broderick, who could only catch a poor little insignificant clergyman with two hundred a year, would die with envy when she heard of her fashionable acquaintance.

“I can quite understand it,” said Miss Green, with a touch of sentiment in her tone, to the Captain’s last remark.

“I was flattered, dear Miss Sophia! I was young! A mere lad, in fact; for I am younger than you probably take me to be; but trouble and poverty have done their worst. Ladies are not always so prudent as yourself. As you were just now remarking——”

“Yes, indeed, I think they should take care of themselves! I’ve no patience with them when they don’t!”

“Ah! you are too kind! Your sex do not always say that! They blame the man. Dear Miss Sophia! you’ll pardon the fault of a high-spirited boy. The

lady was older than I. I looked to her for guidance. Circumstances prevented me from marrying. I told her so. Alas! how can I tell you the rest? You, so pure, so good, so noble! There was a child born—do not turn away! I have brought a blush to your cheek! The blush of innocence! I wish I could spare you, but, dear lady, you asked for the truth, and you promised to be merciful.”

“And that child was the girl whom we have just seen?”

“It was.”

“And the lady? Surely it was not Mrs. Meadows?”

“Too true! too true!”

“What a wicked woman!”

“Don’t say so.”

“But she was! She ought to have known better!”

“Now, do you see, Miss Sophia, I am kept from my own child, and she not only

lives in luxury, but she has a paltry sum of money, a thousand pounds, settled on her by her mother's relations, which can be of no use to her, and would be a god-send to me. I'm sure the dear child would give it up.'

"Of course she ought to. Did Mrs. Meadows do anything for you?"

"Miss Sophia! Do you think I'd stoop to accept even a penny from a woman I did not love? Never! I'd rather die!"

"Did she leave you anything? I fancied I recognised a ring of hers on your finger."

"This was just a little keepsake that she wished me to have, her friend said. You see she loved me once, Miss Sophia!"

"Well, I call it shameful that that girl does nothing for you. She has everything in the world that any girl could wish. If

she wanted to eat gold, I believe that foolish Thornton Meadows would let her."

"Perhaps she would do something if she only knew, poor girl! If she'd only give me that thousand, to which I consider I really have a right, I should be contented. That would not interfere with Mr. Meadows in any way."

"I wonder Mrs. Meadows never mentioned to me that the child had money. She never did."

"It's such a trifle—a mere trifle—to people in your position. And you see, Miss Sophia, some men in my place would extort money by threatening to expose the state of affairs. How would the Squire of Overton like to hear that he had married a lady who—but I will not pollute your ears. And how would young miss in all her pride like to know that she's illegitimate? For I don't

suppose she does know, from all I can learn.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t,” said Miss Green.

“But far be it from me to accept money for anything so ignoble. I will not betray them. I only ask to be allowed access to my daughter; and that I feel sure would not be given.”

“Well, I think I can promise to help you. Circumstances rather favour me, for Mr. Meadows is going abroad.”

“Is he?” said the Captain. “Then it will be easy enough to see her.”

“I don’t know about that. She has a governess now who is always with her, and she’s as carefully guarded as though she were made of gold. But I see a chance of doing something on Saturday.”

“In this week?”

“Yes; Mr. Meadows leaves on Friday

evening, and will stay in town for the night. Do you know Overton village?"

"No; I have never been there, though it has held for so many years my lovely daughter."

"Abington Station's the nearest. It's a long walk, but you could get a fly there. It's about half-an-hour's drive. If you can manage to be at Overton Hall by four o'clock, I'll promise that your daughter shall be there alone—at least, I'll do my best. If I fail you must not think it is for want of trouble on my part."

"I trust you implicitly, dear Miss Sophia."

"I should advise you to drive up to the Hall, and inquire for Miss Meadows, and send in your card. She can hardly refuse to see a relation."

"But suppose she recognised me to-

day. I cannot be certain whether she did."

"I should hardly think she did. We always understood in the village that you were Mrs. Meadows's husband, and were dead."

"Of course, of course."

"Do you think your daughter knows differently?"

"I doubt it. She was very young when they lost sight of me, and her mother would hardly trust a child with the truth."

"I think she'll be sure to see you! I've often heard her say she wished she had some relations!"

"Poor child! I shall hope to get a filial welcome, Miss Sophia, and if we can arrange things amicably there will be no need for our little secret to be divulged, and I can trust to you for my sake to keep it."

Miss Green had no intention whatsoever of keeping the secret. She thought it about the nicest little morsel in the way of scandal that had ever been dished up to her, and she meant to make good use of it when opportunity should serve. Mr. Meadows should find out the cost of snubbing her in the way he had done.

This worthy couple sat for some time engaged on various little dainty dishes, and much conversation. The former contented the Captain, and the latter the lady. When they drove to Paddington, Miss Green reluctantly begged her companion to leave her before they entered the station, as she thought it better that Mr. Meadows should not again encounter them together. The Captain, only too glad to be released now that there was no more prospect of food or money, bade a sentimental adieu.

“ You’ll not think the worse of your poor

friend, dear Miss Sophia?" said the Captain as he was leaving the cab.

"Oh, it's a naughty, naughty man!" said Miss Sophia, shaking her finger at him.

CHAPTER II.

MISS GREEN was particularly busy in the village on the day after the party at Overton Hall. She no longer looked as black as thunder, but went about smiling as though much pleased with herself and all the world. She was particularly gracious to Parson Broderick, with whom she had sought an interview concerning the decorations for the church ; for the Harvest Thanksgiving was to be celebrated on the following Sunday.

“Really now, Mr. Broderick,” she said, “I feel quite ashamed to trouble you at this time in the morning, for you

must be dreadfully tired after the party. I suppose they kept it up very late?"

"I left them still dancing," said the parson, "for it's not much fun for an old bachelor like me to be watching young folk dance till daylight."

"Don't call yourself old yet, Mr. Broderick!" said Miss Green in a tone of good-humoured banter. The parson had expected to find her very much out of temper at not being asked to the party, and with his usual goodness began to impute her present mood to a wise determination on her part not to be annoyed by a small thing.

"She's really a good sort of woman after all," thought the parson, "and Fanny exaggerates her faults."

"You'll make me feel quite an old woman, you know," she went on, "if *you* talk of age. So you're not going to join

Mr. Meadows in his trip on the Continent!"

"No; I must go to Fanny's wedding next month, and then I shall stay a bit with the old people at home. I haven't seen them for some time now."

"You and Mr. Meadows used to be such great friends once. I was rather astonished to hear he'd chosen Mr. Ackerman for his companion. Such a very strange man, Mr. Ackerman. Don't you think so?"

"He's quiet and reserved; but I think he gets on very well with Meadows."

"It's so odd that he's been here more than a year now, and we know no more of him than we did at first. He's so cautious, too: and never by any chance lets a word drop of his previous history."

"Oh! I think he talks very freely to *us*

about his life. I have not noticed any caution in that respect."

"Don't you think, Mr. Broderick, to touch on a delicate subject, he's rather fond of Miss Meadows? Haven't you observed it?"

"Well, really," said the parson, looking very uncomfortable, "I can't say that I have noticed it. He's so very much older; and she's a mere girl."

"Not so young as you think, though. Poor Mrs. Meadows! I suppose she thought it would make her younger! She was a strange woman. I always thought there was something mysterious about her, and you may depend on it, Mr. Broderick, though she's dead, poor thing, we've not heard the last of her yet—not yet!" and she shook her head, as though she would say she knew a thing or two. "I took her up," she went on, "out of pity—quite out of pity:

for you know it was an unfortunate position for a woman to be raised suddenly from a mere servant to the mistress of a place like Overton Hall. It was the duty of every true Christian to take her up; don't you think so, Mr. Broderick?"

"It was of course kind; but I don't think she needed pity; she would have made her way very well. Mrs. Meadows was a strong-minded woman."

"Poor thing! I can't but pity her. But I shouldn't wonder if it turned out in the end that I rather compromised myself in taking her up; do you see, Mr. Broderick?"

"No; I don't see how you could have done so. As Meadows's wife she was entitled to respect."

"Ah, well! it was an unfortunate affair, and I'll say nothing more about it; but mark my words, we have not heard the

last of her yet. So Mr. Meadows starts this evening?"

"Yes; he wants me to go with them and stay the night in town and see them off to-morrow, but I tell him you ladies will want me to look after the decorations."

"No; now don't stay on my account. I've got all ready, and only want a little help in the putting up. Don't you think, now, you could persuade your sister to give me a hand to-morrow? It's no good for *me* to ask her, for you know, Mr. Broderick, she and I do not hit it off; and I'm sure it's no fault of mine."

"Fanny has a bit of a temper; and always had."

"I'm glad to hear you say so; for anyone would think I was her worst enemy, from the way she goes on, and I'm sure I only want to be friendly, if she'll let me."

“ I’m sure she’ll help you. I’ll ask her to-day before I start.”

“ And Miss Courtley, too ; do you think she’d mind coming over for an hour to-morrow afternoon. I should get on famously if they’d both come ; I’ve only my sister Bessie and Mrs. Gilbert to help me, and poor Mrs. Gilbert, she’s very good-natured, but she’s so slow.”

“ Yes, I’ll certainly ask them.”

“ Ask them to do it to oblige *you*, you know.”

“ I daresay they’d be pleased to oblige you also.”

“ Ah ! I don’t know about that. But I’m humble, Mr. Broderick. If certain young ladies choose to be sharp and rude to me, I bear it patiently ; and I think to myself, they’ll know better in time.”

The parson was quite pleased with this view of things taken by Miss Green ; and began to think that she was a very

much maligned person. He prepared in his own mind a little lecture for his sister when he should see her later in the day ; and determined to point out that, so far from having been vindictive at not having been invited to the party, Miss Green was in a most Christian frame of mind ; exceedingly anxious to be on friendly terms with Fanny and all the family, and grieved that any of them should ever think of her otherwise.

“ Oh, indeed ! ” said the astute Fanny when the lecture was delivered ; “ she wants to serve her own ends in some way, or she’d never be so friendly. I suppose we must go Edith, eh ? Three o’clock did you say ? ”

Fanny was very properly rebuked for this unchristian way of accepting Miss Green’s overtures.

Meanwhile Miss Green made her way to the village ; and after lecturing John

Tucker, whom she caught before he had time to escape from her clutches; and scolding Mrs. Garraway, who had not sent her children to Sunday-school on the previous Sunday; and going into old Hearn's cottage to ask how his rheumatics were, and hearing what gossip he had; and calling on Mrs. Whitly to know whether she had yet got the money to pay up her back subscription to the Mothers' Meetings; she turned into a cottage where a handsome, strong-looking young woman stood ironing, and two little children scrambled about on the floor. The woman dropped a curtsey.

"And how's your husband?" said Miss Green.

"He's better to-day, Miss, but he's very weak. Doctor says he must have plenty of good food, but he might as well tell him to eat gold, as far as that goes. So long as he's too ill to work, Miss, why,

there's nothing but the bit I makes and what the parish gives. We was stupid to leave London; but we was out o' work, and as he was born here, he says 'let's go back to Oakshire and see what we can do;' and then he was took ill afore ever we got settled."

"Well, Mrs. Miles, we must do what we can for you, but you must come to church if you expect to be looked after. You see neither of you came when you had the chance before your husband was ill, and you can't expect to get on unless you do."

"My husband, he was never much of a church-going one; he's always for settin' quiet of a Sunday and restin'; and as I'm a-washin' all the week——"

"But you'll have no blessing on your work if you don't go to church."

"And then there's the children, Miss——"

“But what will you do if you have seven or eight? You ought to be thankful there are only two at present.”

“Seven or eight, Miss! Lord save us! I should go out of my mind. We shall never have as many as that, Miss; we’ve found it hard enough with two; and we don’t mean to have no more, that’s sure enough.”

“You mustn’t talk like that, Mrs. Miles. It’s wicked. You must take what Providence sends. If He sends mouths He sends food for them.”

“So I’ve heard tell. But I wouldn’t go for to trust Providence to that extent myself, for it’s hard enough to find food for these ’ere two a’ready without havin’ any more.”

“You must look at it in a more Christian spirit, Mrs. Miles, and consider these troubles are sent to you to make you turn your thoughts to Christ.”

“ Well, Miss, I daresay there’s a great deal o’ pleasure in thinkin’ o’ Christ for them as has time ; but it’s as much as ever I can do to think o’ the washin’ and my poor sick man there, and the children.”

“ But if you go to Christ he will help you. He says, ‘ *Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* ’ ”

“ If I knew where to find him I’m sure I’d go, for rest’s a blessed thing, that indeed it is ; and when I could get plenty of it I thought never a thing about it. I’m sure when I was a servant and had plenty of good food and a good bed to lie on, and fine clothes to my back, I little thought what there was in store for me.”

“ You should have kept single, Mrs. Miles, and then you wouldn’t have had all this trouble.”

“ But I wouldn’t give my Tom up, Miss,

not for all the fine clothes in the world. Only I do wish that I could get him a bit o' nice food that he could fancy. When I see him a-lyin' there looking so pale and weak, I feel a'most as if I could go and steal something for him, I do indeed; only if I was to get took up, what 'ud become of him and the children?"

"It's very wicked to talk like that, Mrs. Miles, and as I told you when I came before, I can do nothing for you while you express such opinions. But if you'll promise me that you'll go to church when your husband's well enough, and that you'll pray to the Lord to give you a better heart, I'll see what I can do."

"I'm sure I'm ready to promise anything that'll help poor Tom, and if it'll do the Lord any good to pray to him I will, but it ain't so much my heart that's bad as my legs, which, with standin' all the week

at the wash-tub and the ironin' board, is that stiff and swelled that——”

“Ah! Mrs. Miles, I'm afraid you're very depraved. But I'll not cast you off. I shall hope to touch your heart by kindness. Now listen to me! Do you know Overton Hall?”

“Not rightly, Miss; but I'll find it, trust me for that.”

“Can you go over to-morrow afternoon between three and four o'clock?”

“Yes, Miss, I shall be taking the washin' home, and then I can go after.”

“Well, mind this, you must be there at exactly a quarter to four, and then perhaps the young lady herself will see you. Give this piece of paper to the servants, and then they'll be sure to tell the young lady. But you must be there at the exact time I say, because I shall tell Miss Meadows to expect you. And then she'll give you something for your husband, and

probably put you on her list till he's well."

"God bless you, Miss! God bless you!"

"You must pray for the Lord's blessing on yourself, too, Mrs. Miles."

"Oh! He don't think of us poor folk, Miss. He's got enough to do to look after gentlefolks. It's the devil as looks after us, Miss, and brings all these troubles."

"You must not talk in that wicked way, Mrs. Miles. Now remember to be quite punctual! a quarter before four."

Miss Green walked home well pleased with herself. She had managed things well.

"It's an ill wind that blows nobody good;" and Mrs. Miles was likely to get the benefit of an ill wind.

She might have been left to suffer for anything Miss Green cared, for that lady

boasted that she did not encourage ungodly people ; but it was just a case which, thought Miss Green, “ those heathenish Meadows’s ” would be likely to take up. So as she walked along she concocted a letter which was to be sent up to Miss Meadows in the evening after the Squire’s departure.

The letter duly arrived when the three ladies were seated in the drawing-room ; all inclined to yawn, as they were tired after the party.

“ Well, I never ! ” said Fanny. “ There must be something up or she’d never be so friendly. Fancy asking us to help her to-morrow, and then writing a friendly letter like this. Why, Pet, she’s quite gushing. She’ll be falling on your neck and kissing you next.”

“ She’d better not ! ” said Pet.

“ Says she hopes we young people enjoyed ourselves ! ”

“Young indeed! She begins to think she’s growing old at last! Well, I wouldn’t have believed it.”

“I told you the poor thing wasn’t as bad as you made out,” said Miss Courtley. “I don’t suppose she expected to be invited, as it was only a dance.”

“Oh! didn’t she, Edith! Don’t you believe her! She’s got some notion in her head. Perhaps wants to get invited here again, and thinks it a good opportunity to try and catch Bart after I’ve gone, and Thorn out of the way. Just you keep your eye on her, Edith, when I’m gone, for there’s no knowing what tricks she’ll be up to. I must go and have a chat with old Keziah to-morrow and see what she makes of it. There’s something in the wind.”

“Well, Fanny, don’t go and make her angry again, just as she’s trying to be friendly,” said Pet. “You do say such

nasty things to her. I don't wonder she flies out, and then she's disagreeable to me and everyone."

"I won't if I can help it, Pet. I shall ask her how she liked her luncheon the other day, and say I hear she's engaged to be married."

"You'd better not!"

"I believe the old thing would be flattered. How I wish I'd seen them!"

"He's the frightfullest man you can imagine."

"Then they're a good match."

"I'm glad she didn't ask me to help her to-morrow, because she always manages to say something nasty, and it makes me feel so nervous."

"But you see she's determined to extend her graciousness to you as well as to us, so she finds an excuse in this woman. What is it she says? 'A poor, ignorant, depraved woman, into whose

mind I have tried to instil some notion of religion without success.' Dear me! I wonder how much old green eyes' religion is worth? 'I hope my dear Miss Meadows,' how affectionate the old thing is becoming! 'that you will see her yourself and listen to her tale; she tells the truth, so you need not fear being imposed upon; and although I know it is Mr. Meadows's principle to pay more attention to the temporal than the spiritual wants of the poor, yet I hope you will accompany any gift you may bestow on her with a few words of religious advice, it will be a good opportunity of softening the woman's heart'. Dear me! quite a grand composition. She took some time to make that up, I'm sure!"

"Really, Fanny," said Edith Courtley, "you won't allow that poor woman to have a single good quality. Now, I think considering how narrow she is generally,

she is really tolerant in wishing this poor depraved woman, as she calls her, to have help."

"How easily you believe anybody, Edith! Mark my words, as sure as we sit here she's got some object in being so friendly all of a sudden, and if you don't find it out before I go, you will after. There's something in the wind."

CHAPTER III.

MISS GREEN'S gift of money to Captain Carstairs was made at rather an unfortunate time for his own interests, for with the remains of a drinking fit still on him he could not settle down quietly while those two crisp bank-notes were in his pocket. So Thursday and Friday were spent rather unprofitably, and when he woke on Saturday at mid-day he found he had only time to dress very hurriedly and catch the train. At the station he took some brandy and soda to "pull himself together" as he expressed it, intending to get something

more substantial in the way of breakfast at Abington. But the railway journey did not improve his condition, and by the time he reached Abington he felt, to use his own words, "cursedly sick." So brandy and soda were again resorted to before he started in the fly for Overton Hall.

Pet was having an interview with Mrs. Miles in the room her father called his workshop, when the Captain was announced.

"Gentleman wished to see you, Miss," said the footman, handing a card on which was inscribed "Captain Carstairs."

"He's in the drawing-room, Miss."

Pet looked at the card and turned very red, and then very white, and then with a sort of half-pleased, half-perplexed look said, "I'll go in presently. You needn't wait." Turning to Mrs. Miles she said,

“Just sit down for a few minutes, I’ll see you presently.”

She walked nervously across the hall to the drawing-room door, wondering what relation it could be. She hesitated as she touched the door-handle. Then an unpleasant thought seemed to strike her. She walked back to the workshop.

“Mrs. Miles,” she said, “I think you had better come and sit in the hall, and then I shall be sure not to forget you when I pass through again. Bring that chair here,” pointing to the wall by the drawing-room door.

Then she went in. The Captain having surveyed himself in a mirror had come to the conclusion that he looked “a beastly object,” and very truly too; for his appearance was much worse than on the previous Wednesday. So he retreated into a dark corner, where he stood with his back to the light, pretending to admire

a small picture. Pet had walked half across the room before he turned round. She gave a little scream, and started back as she saw him.

“Don’t be alarmed, my dear! though a stranger I am very nearly related to you. Don’t go away!” said the Captain, for Pet had reached the door.

“I will fetch—er—fetch my governess,” said Pet, who was trembling with terror.

“Listen a moment! Miss Meadows will scarcely like an *esclandre* in the house when her father comes to see her.”

“Father!” said Pet, standing in the corner by the door with her face as white as possible.

“Yes, my dear young lady! I think you’d better listen to me for a few minutes. I haven’t the slightest wish to alarm you. I love my dear child too sincerely—too ardently,” said the Captain, standing in as sentimental an attitude as

his debauched body could assume, and laying his hand on his heart. "Yes; your father! your own father—whose heart aches for love of you."

"But my father's dead!" said Pet.

"Pardon me! I don't think I am quite dead yet. Your poor mother perhaps thought I was dead. But I see I'm unwelcome! Had I returned full of riches and honours my own child would not have refused to know me. I come once more to look upon the face of my beloved and long-lost child,"—here a handkerchief was applied to the bloodshot eyes—"and I am not even asked to take a seat."

"Pray be seated," said Pet, in a trembling voice, and taking a seat herself near the door.

The Captain, afraid to advance too near the windows, kept at some distance.

“I’m sure,” he said, still applying the handkerchief, “I expected a very different reception from this; but my place has been supplied by others, and I understand Mr. Meadows has adopted you.”

“Yes,” said Pet, feeling every moment as if she would faint, and yet anxious to keep up to hear what this horrible-looking man had to say to her. She clutched at a sort of hope that he was perhaps only an impostor, who wanted to extort money.

“Of course I’ve no wish to interfere with him, though I should count it a blessed privilege to have so sweet a young lady as yourself for companion—for you have grown up charmingly, Bella, you really have”—she flinched at being addressed in this way. “But I really don’t wish to assert my rights if you’ve no inclination to leave your present quarters,

which I must say seem to be very comfortable."

Pet did not speak.

"Don't look so frightened, Bella!" said the Captain, settling himself more comfortably in his easy chair. "You need not fear your own father. I'm not going to take you away. Would you like to come and live with me?"

"I do not wish to leave Mr. Meadows," said Pet, "he's the only father I have known."

"Ha, ha! She forgets the days when her poor father carried her about and nursed her, and played games with her, and crawled about on the floor to amuse her! Her father is poor and ill now, and she doesn't want to know him. It's the way of the world—the way of the world! My own child lives in luxury, and I am in want."

"I'm very sorry you're in want," said

Pet, feeling some remorse. "Shall I ask Mr. Meadows to do something for you."

"Well, perhaps you might! But you can at least give me up your own money. I daresay now it's accumulated to a tidy sum, hasn't it?"

"My money?"

"Yes; that thousand pounds which your mother couldn't touch, because it was to be spent on you. It used to bring in a tidy little bit."

"I never heard of it," said Pet.

"Oh, indeed! Then I suppose Mr. Meadows takes that, and counts it part of your expenses. Very cool, too!"

"I'm sure my father has never had anything belonging to me!" said Pet, firing up; "I owe everything to him."

"Father indeed! Your father is in this room at this moment, Miss Bella!"

"How am I to know that you are my father?" said Pet, who was gaining courage.

"Is my word not enough, then? Am I to be branded as a liar and an impostor? and by my own daughter? Oh, Bella, Bella! To think I should live to see this day! To be called an impostor by my own beloved child! A liar, too, by the sweet girl who has my blood in her veins!"

Pet shuddered at the thought of being indebted to this monster for her existence.

"At any rate," said Pet, "you can hardly expect me suddenly to have the feelings of a daughter towards you."

"Of course not, my dear child, of course not. Though I have never ceased to have fatherly affection for you."

“Then why did you leave me and my mother?”

“Circumstances compelled it, Bella. We cannot fight against the force of circumstances. I have been all my life the victim of circumstances. Alas! it seems as if I ever should be! I find myself once more restored to my long-lost daughter: but, cruel fate! she loves me not. She wishes me begone! She is too grand to know her poor father! She will leave him to struggle with poverty as best he can, while she lies on a bed of roses!”

“I will speak to Mr. Meadows about it; and ask him to help you; but it seems to me a very awkward position. I don’t know what he will say.”

“I hear he is very fond of his *adopted* daughter, eh?”

“Yes; I think papa loves me as much as if I were his own child.”

“Papa! Ah! once those sweet lips addressed me by that name! Papa loves his adopted child, does he? He makes her the mistress of this grand house, and expects everyone to fall down and worship her, eh? Very nice indeed! very nice. And what would papa say if he knew his idol was base-born!”

“Base-born! What do you mean?”

“What if everyone were to point at the mistress of Overton Hall as an illegitimate child, a bastard?”

“Illegitimate!” said Pet, clasping her hands, and turning very pale again.

“Yes; illegitimate! proud Miss Bella! a base-born child.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that your mother was never married to me. She was no better than a common woman—a — but I will not pollute your young ears.”

“Does my father—er—Mr. Meadows—know this?”

“Probably not, I should say. Your mother was not likely to advertise her own shame. And he need never know it, nor anyone else, if my dear girl will only be prudent and manage matters well. If she will give her poor father sufficient to keep him from want, everything shall be kept secret. Will she agree?”

“I don’t know!” said Pet, bursting into tears. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Come now, don’t cry! don’t cry! I don’t want to distress my dear child. I promise to keep it a profound secret if my little girl will just send me a bit of her pocket-money now and then; or if she will get that bit of money made over to me. She wouldn’t like to see her father, her own real father, in want.”

“I can’t hide it from Mr. Meadows,” she said, sobbing. “I’ve never kept anything from him. I must tell him.”

“Beware, my dear, that he doesn’t cast you off. These grand people can forgive anything but base birth. It is the greatest of crimes in their eyes. I wouldn’t advise it. I really wouldn’t. That fine-looking aristocratic gentleman I saw the other day will scarcely care to have a bastard presiding at his table, or to go about with a lady who is pointed at with scorn by the very meanest labourer. Remember that a workhouse child who is born in wedlock has a better position in society than yourself. Your own servants here who wait on you so obsequiously will point at you. Ha! ha! My young lady will not hold her head quite so high as when she thought she was the lawful daughter of Captain Carstairs! Perhaps

she'll come down a little now and condescend to speak civilly to a gentleman when he takes the trouble to come and see her. She won't toss her head proudly and insinuate that he's a liar and an impostor, will she ? The mistress of Overton Hall thought she was going to snub her father, did she ?”

“I think you're a very wicked man !” said Pet, rubbing her eyes in vexation ; for she felt she had lowered herself by crying in the presence of such a wretch.

“Very wicked, eh ? Dear me ! Wicked for bringing you into the world, eh ? Well, I think you have a very pleasant time of it. No doubt you have plenty of pocket-money, eh ? So perhaps you'll hand your father over a little before he goes, and make an arrangement to allow him a settled income, and then he'll keep that pretty little secret he mentioned.”

“I don't carry money,” said Pet.

“Miss Courtley keeps the accounts now.”

“Dear me, we’re too grand to *carry* money, eh? Our privy purse is kept for us, like the Queen’s. We can’t even touch anything so vulgar as money, eh? Or is it that our pretended father is a trifle near, and won’t trust us with any, but keeps that nice little sum that belongs to us for his own use.”

“My father gives me everything I ask for,” said Pet, fiercely.

“Ah, then! we’ll ask for pocket-money to supply our poor father with; and if we don’t we’ll take the consequences.”

“I tell you I cannot get money without saying what I want to do with it.”

“Then I tell you, you *must*, Bella; so there’s an end of it. Here is an address,” he said, handing his card, “where it will

reach me safely. To day's Saturday. On Tuesday morning I know I shall find a registered letter at that address. It will enable your poor father to get a little medical advice, and a better lodging, and a decent bottle of wine with his dinner. I'm sorry," he said, rising, "that my sweet daughter has not received her father more affectionately ; but young people are hard-hearted ! They have not yet learnt trouble. They have no sympathy with suffering. Good-bye, my dear child, your father will not trouble you with his presence again so long as the money is paid. If it's not he'll call to see how you are. He might be mentioned as an uncle, if necessary, an uncle who has seen better days, and is in want of a few comforts. There'd be no harm in telling papa that Uncle Carstairs has called and begged a trifle, do you see, my dear ? That will make it all right. Don't ring ! I can find

my way out. I daresay my carriage is at the door. Just mention to that lady who carries the privy purse that a few pounds are wanted for a poor old uncle. You'll not find him a troublesome uncle, if he gets his pocket-money regular. Don't you see? Give my sweetest regards to the amiable Miss Green. She is, I believe, an intimate friend of yours. Charming person! Such a cultivated and refined mind. You couldn't do better than imitate her. Take my blessing, my dear," he said, laying his hand on her shoulder. She recoiled from his touch. "What! not let your father touch you! How mighty particular we are!"

"I think," said Pet, screwing up all her courage, and drawing herself up, and expressing the utmost contempt in her face, "as you came here simply to extort money from me, there is no occasion for any familiarity between us. I'll mention

the matter to my father, and he will do what he thinks proper."

"Dear me! Quite the tragedy queen! What a capital actress! What talent lost to the public! If dear papa should turn the base-born child out, she'll make quite a mint of money on the stage. Perhaps she'll be glad to come to her poor father for an introduction. Ta-ta, my dear Really I'm very reluctant to leave you, but I'm glad to see you so comfortable. It's a fine place! and this is a handsome apartment! Is this the state-room where you receive your visitors? I daresay you do it nicely—very nicely now! That touch of tragedy was charming! There must be quite a vein of undeveloped talent in you! But no wonder! it's in the blood. The Carstairs' were always talented? Is my dutiful daughter going to shake hands with me? No? Won't she condescend to touch her own flesh and blood?

Suppose we make her!" he said, suddenly darting at her, and catching her in his clutches.

She gave an agonised scream, and shouted out "Mrs. Miles!" as loudly as possible. Before the Captain had time to think whether the scream would bring anyone, or indeed before he had time to release her, Mrs. Miles had rushed in and given him a blow on the head that sent him reeling to the ground.

"You devil, you!" she said, "daring to touch this young lady. I'll take care of you, Miss," she said, turning to Pet. "Don't you be afraid while I'm here! I've got a pair of arms as'll do for any drunken-looking wretch like that. I ain't stood at the wash-tub for nothing."

The Captain was endeavouring to pick himself up. Having eaten nothing all day but a biscuit at Abington, he was weak,

and floundered about some time before he could regain his legs.

“A nasty, red-eyed coward!” said Mrs. Miles, “daring to touch this beautiful young lady.”

“Send that loud female away, Bella, and let me have a little brandy! I’m very much hurt.”

Mrs. Miles had put her arm round Pet to support her, for she looked ready to faint.

“Don’t trouble about him, Miss! I’ll send him off. You just come to this ’ere sofa. If he wants brandy he can go to the public-house for it. Now then you, Sir!” she said, turning to him, “just you leave this young lady, and get off! There’s your carriage at the door awaiting for you!”

The Captain saw he had his match in the washerwoman, and thought it best to depart quietly. “Good-bye, my dear

niece," he said, trying to assume his old gaiety, and kissing his hand to her as he went out of the room. "I shall expect to hear from you !"

CHAPTER IV.

FANNY BRODERICK was one of those out-spoken people who often cause a good deal of mischief. She had no intention of being a mischief-maker—far from it. But she could see no reason why people should not speak out their minds. She disliked Miss Green, and as she informed Edith Courtley, while they were walking to the church to assist with the decorations, she “did not see why she should toady to old green-eyes, because she happened to be in an amiable temper.”

“But you should encourage her

attempts at amiability," said Miss Courtley.

"So I would, Edith, if I thought they were sincere. But I know for certain she has some design, don't you see."

"You're dreadfully suspicious, Fanny! I really don't see why the poor woman should not be allowed to have a little goodness in her; and if she has, surely we should cultivate it, and make the most of it."

"You always take that sentimental view of things, Edith; and you know how often you have been deceived!"

"Well, you'll promise you won't say anything unpleasant this afternoon, won't you?"

"No, my dear! I'll not promise anything of the kind. It just depends on how old green-eyes behaves herself. I'm not going to stand anything from her."

The ladies were soon busily engaged

over decorating the church. Miss Green had brought her sister and Mrs. Gilbert with her, and had commenced some time before Edith and Fanny joined them; in fact, there was little left to be done.

Miss Green received the newcomers with just a suspicion of condescension and triumph in her manner.

Fanny was quick enough to see it.

“I told you so!” she whispered to Edith, presently. “Do you see how grand she is? There’s something up. I believe she’s going to be married.”

It is noticeable that those who are only accustomed to use a church during service, speak in an undertone if they happen to enter it at any other time; but the children of clergymen, and those who are accustomed to enter the building for other purposes than that of prayer, talk as naturally as they would in a drawing-room. Fanny Broderick had from her earliest

remembrances walked in and out of her father's church without any particular feeling of reverence for the building. She would carry on a conversation in a church, when it was not service time, just as she would in an ordinary room. She did not alter either tone or manner.

She had been buzzing about while the decorating business was proceeding, having something to say first to one and then to another, on any and every subject. She gave her opinion very freely on what she thought of the decorations, and compared them with what was done at her father's church. Occasionally she snatched up Keziah's broom, for the old servant was there to sweep up after the ladies, and flourished it about to show what she could do in the way of sweeping. She was altogether in a very lively mood; but Edith could see by her manner that there was a storm brewing.

“Nasty proud thing!” whispered Fanny; “can’t you see how she’s lording it over us? Anyone would think we were her servants!”

“Do keep quiet, Fanny!”

“I shall give her a piece of my mind presently.”

“Now, Miss Broderick,” said Mrs. Gilbert, coming up to her, “isn’t it charming? You really must give us *some* praise, we’ve worked so hard.”

“Yes; it’s not bad!”

“Ah, now! that’s very qualified praise!”

“Well, I’m sure it does *you* great credit!”

“And Miss Green, too!”

“I wish we had you at my father’s to help! I always think it a horrid bother!”

“Now you mustn’t say that! And you just going to marry a clergyman too! I suppose the next time you help in decorations it will be in your husband’s church?”

“Oh! I shan’t bother then! I shall expect the ladies in the parish to look after it!”

“Now really, Miss Broderick, that’s very funny of you. Well, I wish you joy, my dear, in your marriage! If I had my time over again, as I often say, I’d keep single; for it’s such a dreadful thing to lose your husband.”

“Now that is a ridiculous idea, Mrs. Gilbert! Fancy going without a husband in case you may lose him! I never heard of such a thing!”

“Ah, my dear, you’re young! you don’t know what trouble is! You can laugh at such notions! I hear you had a charming party the other night.”

“Ay, it was lovely! I danced every dance, and never had the same partner twice. Wasn’t that capital? We didn’t ask you, Mrs. Gilbert, because we knew you wouldn’t care to sit and watch the

dancing. We only asked *young* people, you know, except where we were obliged to ask chaperons. It's no good to ask *old* ones to dance, is it?"

"Hush!" said Mrs. Gilbert in a whisper, looking in the direction of Miss Green; "I think she was a little annoyed about it."

"Well, you see," said Fanny, talking more loudly than ever, "its utterly ridiculous to fill up the room with a lot of old ladies who don't dance; and of course anyone with a grain of sense, like yourself, would understand it; but there are some women who never will realize they are growing old; and I believe they'd dance till eighty. Yes, that reredos is lovely!" she said, turning to it. "Of course that's *your* work?"

"I always undertake that. But Miss Green's font is beautiful, is it not?"

“Well, I shouldn’t call it correct myself, because, as my father always says, one ought never to use anything but flowers or fruit, or things that come from the earth, in church decorations. Papa would never stand that white cotton wool stuff and silver tinsel under the berries.”

Miss Green’s face was darkening.

“How is Miss Meadows?” said Miss Green, addressing herself to Miss Courtley.

“She’s very well, thank you.”

“I should have come round yesterday to see her, but thought she’d be tired after her party. Did she get my letter, do you know?”

“Yes; she said she would see the woman this afternoon.”

“I’m glad of that. I hear she gave a most charming party. Quite an event for her. I suppose we may consider she’s come out now.”

“As to that,” said Fanny, turning round and joining Miss Green and Edith, “I don’t see that it makes any difference. She’s been used to receive and go out the same as if she were grown up. My cousin never goes by rule in that sort of thing.”

“No; I don’t think he does,” said Miss Green, significantly.

“Besides, this was *my* party, given especially for my benefit.”

“Indeed? How very nice!”

“Yes; Cousin Pet doesn’t care for parties a bit. She left everything to me. And I think I managed well, for everybody said how charming it was; didn’t they, Edith?”

“Yes, I think you were very successful.”

“Who made that lovely design in everlastings?” said Fanny, pointing to a bit of floral work on the middle panel of the pulpit.

“I bought that in London,” said Miss Green.

“Oh! I see! By the way, that reminds me. Oh! what have I heard, Miss Green?” shaking her finger at her. “What has a little bird told me about a certain lady being seen with a certain gentleman. Taking a little lunch together, eh? All sorts of good things, and touching glasses, and putting heads very close together, and going in a hansom. I should say engaged, shouldn’t you, Mrs. Gilbert?”

“Who was it?” asked Mrs. Gilbert, looking astonished.

“You must ask Miss Green; she can tell you all about it.”

“Have you heard?” said Mrs. Gilbert, as if the one subject had suggested another, “that Miss Seaforth is to be married? And quite a young man, they say; twenty years younger than herself.”

“Is she really? Well, it seems to me old brides are the fashion. Nothing under fifty is interesting now-a-days, and sixty is quite the rage. Young brides are nowhere. Well, I don’t see that there’s anything more for us to do. In fact I don’t think we’ve been much help. You could have done very well without us.”

“At any rate you’ve cheered us up in our work,” said Mrs. Gilbert. “You’re always so lively, my dear. I’ve been working here nearly all day, and I’m so tired.”

“Come along, Edith,” said Fanny, “I want to see if Bart’s come back. Keziah, shall you have finished soon?”

“Yes, ma’am, I’ve just about done now, and can’t be more’n five or ten minutes.”

“You see, Edith,” said Fanny, as they walked across the churchyard to the

wicket-gate, "she's got something in her mind, though I don't know what. I really think the old thing's going to be married, and perhaps she wanted to find out whether Pet had told me about seeing her with that man. She's evidently very uppish about something, and she evidently didn't really want us to help; for there wasn't much to do."

"Perhaps she thought they would be backwarder than they were!"

"No; it wasn't that. The old cat's got something in her mind. I think she rather liked being chaffed about being married."

"Yes; but she didn't like that remark about elderly brides being in fashion. She looked as though she could have knocked you down."

"Did she? poor thing!"

"I think you've been as disagreeable to her as you could; for you've made

several unpleasant remarks in reference to her age ; and it's hardly fair to make age a subject for ridicule."

"I'm sure I never do, Edith. But when you see an old fool like that mincing and simpering about the place as though she were a silly girl of eighteen, you can't help giving her an occasional slap in the eye."

The parson had not yet returned ; he was making the most of a day in London. It was now past five o'clock, and a somewhat stormy day had given place to calm evening. There was a deep golden sunset, which was particularly acceptable to Fanny and her companion after the gloom of the church.

"What a jolly evening !" said Fanny ; "let's trot about the garden till Keziah comes. I *must* have a word with her. I don't suppose she'll be long, and there's lots of time before dinner."

“What a sweet garden this is!” said Edith Courtley; “it’s so suggestive of peace and quietness. That cedar must be very old, and the elm tree must be at least two hundred years. Trees are such companions, aren’t they?”

“Not very lively ones, except on a windy night,” said Fanny. “And a garden’s dreadfully expensive, unless you have enough glebe land to make it pay to keep a man; and then, unless you’ve got a conscientious man and understand it yourself, it doesn’t often pay.”

“But I wasn’t thinking of whether a garden paid,” said Edith.

“But I was,” said Fanny, “because it would be so nice if you and Bart were to marry.”

“How silly you are, Fanny! You know we’re too poor. Besides, your brother doesn’t care for me more than any other woman.”

“I don’t know about that! But as to being poor—well, if you put both your incomes together, you’ve got as much as we have. Of course Thorn has been generous to me; but he’s sure to do something for Bart now that he’s no longer tutor to Pet. You’re all so afraid of poverty. I declare I’m the only one in the family that isn’t. Perhaps Thorn would get Bart a better living, and then there might be a more convenient vicarage. I call this house dreadfully inconvenient.”

“Do you? I think it’s a charming house!”

“You like such dry, dusty old corners. I like a modern place, with the rooms convenient and regular, and not all anyhow, and up and down steps.”

“Well, Fanny, it’s no good speculating on the house, for I don’t suppose I shall ever live here. If your brother marries

at all I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he married Pet."

"Pet! What makes you think so?"

"I can see he likes her. I'm sure of it. And I suppose she'll have plenty of money; and of course a rich wife would be more acceptable to him than a poor one."

"I don't believe he cares for her particularly."

"I'm sure he does."

"Well, I shall be most dreadfully vexed if he marries her; though of course it would be better to keep the money in the family than let it go out. You know, Edith, I always *do* feel a little annoyed to think that a mere stranger like that should be adopted, when some of us are so poor. Of course she'll have a lot when she marries; though when Thorn marries again he's almost sure to have a family of his own, and that will cut Miss

Pet down a bit. But if she marries a rich man I don't see that Thorn need settle so very much on her. Wasn't she a lucky girl? Because you know they weren't anybody particular. Her father was a Captain Carstairs; but I think there's something odd about the family, for her mother never talked of her relations; and never had one to see her the whole time she was here. Funny, wasn't it?"

"Perhaps they were all dead!"

"They couldn't every one be dead, that would be too ridiculous."

"She has quite got the manner and appearance of being well-born."

"Do you think so? I don't call her stylish enough."

"But she's so natural. I should think she will grow up a very fine character. She's scarcely developed yet; and she's been so used to looking to Mr. Meadows

in everything that she seems lost without him."

"Yes; I call her dreadfully spoilt. Here comes Keziah. Will you give us a cup of tea, Keziah? we've missed our afternoon cup."

"Yes, miss, with pleasure. As I've missed mine too, miss, for I likes my cup early. But it was no good a-comin' away till them ladies had finished a-messin' about. I'm always glad when these decorations is over; there's a deal o' mess and dirt with 'em. They was only once a year, at Christmas, when I fust took care o' the church; but now they has them for anythink and everythink."

"But don't you think they are very pretty, Keziah?" asked Fanny.

"Well, miss, they're a change like, and somethin' to make the people come to church; and it keeps *her* pretty well

employed," pointing her thumb over her shoulder to indicate Miss Green, who was still in the church; "and if she ain't got somethin' to do she's as like to be on to mischief as not."

"I believe she's going to be married, Keziah."

"Lord forbid! I thought you was only joking when you said that."

"No, it was quite true what I said about the gentleman."

"Then it's her money he wants, miss; for no one ever would go for to marry such a ugly-lookin' lady as Miss Green. You should a' seen her when you left the church. She was terrible put out with you."

"What did she say?"

"Why, Mrs. Gilbert said you was full of fun; and Miss Green, she says, I call her ojus, she says, a-stickin' of herself up about givin' a party, and nothink to boast

of neither, when the missis of the 'ouse ain't respectable."

"Not respectable! Whatever did she mean?"

"Them was her words, miss, her very words. And Mrs. Gilbert she answers, 'Not respectable, Miss Green! what are you a-talkin' of?' and Miss Green, she says, 'Not respectable, I tells you, Mrs. Gilbert, and not fit for you and me to bemean ourselves to, for Miss Meadows she's base-born, she's a bustard.'"

"A bustard, Keziah! Whatever do you mean. Did she say bustard?"

"Yes, miss, a nat'ral child don't you see, miss, not born o' respectable parents; no father to her name, miss, like Lucy Garraway's child as the grandmother's a-bringin' up."

"Oh! I see what you mean. But did Miss Green say that to Mrs. Gilbert?"

“Yes, miss, them’s her very words; and she was in a tearin’ rage when she said it.”

Fanny looked at Edith. “What can it mean?” she said.

“Well, miss, I’ll go in, and be a-gettin’ the tea ready,” said Keziah. Fanny and Edith went into the parlour.

“She’d hardly dare to invent such a diabolical story as that, Edith, do you think?”

“I don’t know. She may have no other foundation than what you were saying just now, that there is some little mystery about her relations.”

“Perhaps so. Of course she’s capable of anything, for you know what a dreadful story she told about me! But there was no mystery about Pet’s father that I ever heard. She must have got something to go upon, for she’d never dare to say such an awful thing if she hadn’t.

Do you know I shouldn't be a bit surprised if it's true, for, when I come to think of it, there are several little things that have puzzled me lately. If it is true, I believe Thorn knows it; and I call it horrid for him to keep her on in the family if he does."

"But you couldn't expect him to love the poor girl any the less because of her misfortune. One would rather treat her with the more consideration."

"Good gracious, Edith; what a dreadful idea!"

"But you wouldn't have a poor child suffer for the indiscretion of its parents, would you?"

"Of course they must suffer. Why, we're told in the Bible that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children."

"I imagine you have scarcely considered the meaning of the passage. At

any rate it is not for *us* to visit the children with the sins."

"Well, I don't know. I suppose it means that they're sure to be pointed at by everybody. You must acknowledge, Edith, that if Pet is what Keziah calls a bastard—I couldn't help laughing when she said it—it really is a very unpleasant position for all the family. We've all acknowledged her and called her 'cousin,' and it would be awfully disgusting if everybody were to know that we have a cousin who wasn't born properly. I call it a most dreadful idea!"

"But all this time when you've known nothing about it, you've liked her, and accepted her; and you like anyone for what they are in spirit, not in flesh, of course."

"Yes, when we didn't know, it was another thing; but if it *is* true, only fancy what an awful difference it will make! I

don't know what I should do ! I should never dare to tell mamma !”

“ Fanny, you ought to be more generous in your ideas !”

“ Generous, Edith ! Why, everyone would be horrified if I coolly told them Thorn had adopted a stepdaughter who was illegitimate. They'd cut me for staying here ! and they'll cut you for being her companion. The more I think of it the more awful it seems ! I do hope it isn't true ; for I shall never be happy about it again. Where could she have heard it ? Do you think Pet knows herself.”

“ I imagine not. She has spoken to me of her father and her early days without the least reserve.”

“ Of course if Miss Green knows it everyone will know it soon. Oh, Edith ! we shall have everyone making the most dreadful remarks. Whatever shall we

do? Shall we write to Thorn about it? It was awfully unkind of him to keep it from us, and let it come out in this dreadful way. It will be all over the place."

"How ridiculous you are, Fanny! working yourself up into this state, when you don't know if a word of it's true. You're ready enough to disbelieve anything Miss Green says, and now you're making yourself dreadfully unhappy over something that may be quite false, and which, at any rate, you've only had second-hand; and Keziah may have exaggerated."

"But she had that dreadful word, don't you see, Edith! She must have heard it, or she wouldn't have made such a mess of it. I'm awfully cut up. I must find out the truth of it. I can't be the same to Pet till I do."

"Now, Fanny, if you're going to be

nasty to Pet I shall be very angry. She was left in my charge, and I am responsible for her. She's dreadfully sensitive, and you'll make her unhappy."

"Well, if people are like that they must expect to be unhappy."

Keziah's appearance with the tea-tray put an end to the discussion.

CHAPTER V.

PET went to her own room after her interview with Captain Carstairs, and for an hour or more lay on her bed, giving way to an hysterical fit. What she had heard she could scarcely yet realize; for the horror and fright caused by the very appearance of the man alone had been enough to upset her. She simply gave way until she had exhausted her strength and passion. Then came a calm, and she began to think. She looked at her watch, and saw it was nearly dinner-time. Fanny and Miss

Courtley had probably returned, and she must meet them at the dinner-table.

However should she manage to do it? And how could she eat any dinner? She must ask them to excuse her; and then they would be sure to come looking after her, and wondering what was the matter. Oh! if she could only be left alone, she thought to herself, to think it all out! Or if she could only rush off at once to her stepfather, and never stop travelling till she reached him in Paris, where was his first resting-place! She had been so used to tell him all her little troubles, and now she had this great one to bear all by herself.

She could not tell Fanny—no; Fanny was not sympathizing in real troubles. And Miss Courtley? Well, she'd rather tell her than Fanny; but it was such a dreadful thing to tell. There was Cousin

Bart—he was such an old friend, and men seemed to understand one better than women—but no; since what happened in the summer she couldn't tell him everything.

Whatever should she do? She would go mad if she had to bear it all alone, she thought. She must tell her father, that was certain. And what would he think? Would he cast her off? Surely not. He was so compassionate to all, even the very lowest. But he would never condescend to bribe that horrible man to keep the secret; and then everyone would point at her.

How she wished she could get away to some lonely place with her father—all alone—no, not quite alone, because he would want Cousin Bart and Mr. Ackerman for company. Then there would be no one to reproach her. Whatever should she do? she thought again, rousing her-

self, and bathing her face in cold water.

Should she make an excuse to Miss Courtley that she wanted ten pounds, and send it on Monday, so that the horrid man should be quiet till she could hear from her father? But would her father approve of it; would he not say it was cowardly? Yet how could she face Fanny and everyone else if it became known? And of course they'd hear somebody had called on her that afternoon, and how she'd screamed, and how Mrs. Miles had interfered.

What should she say? She never could tell the truth, for they would despise her so dreadfully. She must tell a lie and say that it was her uncle, and that he frightened her; and yet she knew her father hated anyone who was not brave enough to speak the truth. But however could she tell the truth in such a case as this? It would be so very dreadful!

Oh! what should she do? she asked herself once more.

She had intended while Miss Courtley and Fanny were away to write a letter to her father, which was to have been sent by the seven o'clock post from Overton village.

“Write a bit every day,” he had said, “and post it whenever you have an address.” So she had looked forward to a quiet hour or two before dinner to write, and now the time had passed and no letter had been sent. The Squire had said so particularly as he was leaving, “Write to-morrow.” There was the first bell! Should she dress and try to brave the evening with Fanny and Miss Courtley? No, she couldn't. Fanny would be sure to ask a hundred questions about the relation that had called. She would never rest till she knew all about him. She must spend the evening alone.

There were footsteps outside ! Hark ! Yes ; it was Fanny and Miss Courtley going to dress. They had passed the door, they were not coming in. Presently there was a knock at the door. It was the lady's-maid. A message was given to her through the door that her services would not be wanted as Miss Meadows had a headache, and would not be able to attend the dinner-table. This caused some inquiries to be made by Miss Courtley, which brought the information that a gentleman had called on Miss Meadows that afternoon, that she had been in the drawing-room some time with him, and that finally she had screamed very loudly, and Mrs. Miles, who was in the hall, had rushed in and knocked down the gentleman, and saved Miss Meadows from being insulted.

This was such a strange and romantic affair that Fanny could not rest

till she knew something more about it.

Dinner was served, but dinner was of very small consequence to Fanny in the face of such excitement as this. Inquiry was made as to whether Mrs. Miles was in the house, but she had long since left, and orders were given that she was to be fetched immediately.

Fanny proposed going up to speak to Pet.

“No, Fanny,” said Edith, “let me go first. She’s so excitable and you’re rather thoughtless, you might make things worse.”

“But I’ve known her so much longer than you have, Edith ; she’s more likely to tell me everything.”

“Now, Fanny, you must, if you please, give way to me. I have the responsibility of taking care of her, and if she’s ill, I shall have to answer for it. You must please let me visit her alone.”

“Very well, but don’t stay long! Come and tell me as soon as you can.”

Fanny employed the time while her friend was absent in again questioning the servants as to what they knew.

Miss Courtley knocked at Pet’s door, and entered.

“I’m so sorry to find you ill again. I’m afraid, what with the party and your father leaving yesterday, that you are rather upset.”

“Yes,” said Pet faintly.

“And I hear you’ve had a visitor this afternoon, who did not prove very agreeable. Was it anyone you knew?”

“It was a relation,” said Pet, “who wanted to claim the liberties of relationship.”

“You didn’t know him then?”

“I suppose I ought to have remembered

him, as he said I had seen him often when I was a child; but I did not remember him. He was very horrible-looking, and I was frightened, that is all."

"Dear me! how very vexing I should have been away! One could not have dreamt of such a thing happening. What relation did he say he was?"

"Uncle," said Pet with some hesitation, for she hated telling a lie.

"You had never seen him since you were a child then?"

"No; I did not know he was living. It has upset me very much, because he looked so horrible."

"Poor child! Don't fret about it. Your nerves are altogether unstrung, Try not to think of it, Pet, dear!" She took the girl's hand between her own. "I wish you'd tell me of anything that troubles you, and believe in my sympathy, will you?"

“Yes,” said Pet, not altogether heartily.

“Of course I can’t expect you to love me all at once, for I have only known you a few weeks. But I admire your father’s character so very much that I think in time you will love me for my admiration of him; for I know how much he is to you. I can quite understand how you feel his absence; for he told me he had never been absent from you more than a day or two for nearly six years. He said he had tried to be mother and father and everything else to you, and that he trusted to me to at least be a mother to you if I could. So you may be sure I shall be glad to cheer you if I can. If there is anything that troubles you, I hope you will tell me.”

Pet began to cry again at this mention of her father. It was the right way to appeal to her; and she was nearly un-

burdening herself of her terrible secret, when it occurred to her that, as Fanny and Miss Courtley were such friends, whatever she confided to the latter would be told to Fanny; and somehow she felt as if she never could face Fanny after the truth was known. So once more she assured her governess that there was nothing more to tell her, except that the uncle who had called said he was very poor and required help, and she had promised to send him ten pounds on Monday, and to ask her father about doing something further.

Miss Courtley went down to dinner, and answered Fanny's thousand and one questions.

After dinner Mrs. Miles arrived, and, after telling her story all over again, was rewarded with silver and a good supper. Then Parson Broderick came in, and had to hear all the particulars from his sister;

also an account of what Miss Green had said in the afternoon. The parson was not, according to Fanny's notion, properly horrified at the revelation made by Miss Green; but he was suddenly fired with the most unchristian-like wish of wanting to find that monster who had annoyed Pet, to bestow on him a good thrashing. Couldn't he see Pet, he wanted to know? No, she was all right, and Edith was with her, said Fanny.

Meanwhile Pet had realized a new phase of the position. In her horror of the Captain, and her amazement at what he had told her, she had for the moment forgotten that Miss Green was somehow mixed up in it. The dreadful man was acquainted with Miss Green. Had he told her all about it? Hardly, or he would not have promised to keep it a secret for money. If Miss Green

knew, everyone knew. Suppose everyone knew already and was pointing at her? What a horrible idea! And she was all alone without her father! Whatever should she do? Should she tell all to Cousin Bart, and ask him to take her at once to her father; at least on Monday? She should not dare to show herself in the village, that was certain. Perhaps the servants were all talking about it!

Suppose the man were only an impostor after all, and trying to get money! If only papa were there he would soon find out. She must write at once and tell him; she could never go to sleep till she'd written; in fact she thought she would never sleep again in her life. But wouldn't it spoil poor papa's enjoyment, just as he had gone away for his health? And that would be so very selfish. But however could she bear it all by herself? She really must ask Cousin Bart's advice.

She was so used to going to her father and Cousin Bart for everything, that it seemed easier to tell a man than a woman of her trouble. So she asked Miss Courtley if she could see Cousin Bart in the schoolroom for a few minutes.

The parson went up-stairs to the room that was so familiar to him; where he had spent so many happy hours with his little pupil. He had never entered it since the day he had asked the unlucky question and been refused. He took his seat at the table just in the old place.

“Dear Cousin Bart!” said Pet, as she went in; “how nice to see you sitting there! I wish I was a little girl again going to have a lesson from you! We were so happy then, weren’t we?” At the remembrance of this she began to cry again.

“My dear child, I’m so sorry to see you like this. Tell me all about it, Pet.

I hear there's been a very unpleasant incident this afternoon. I wish I could catch the wretch! I daresay he's an impostor and wants to get money."

"He says he only wants money; but I'm afraid it's true," said Pet, crying.

"He says he's an uncle, doesn't he?"

"Oh, it's worse than that, much worse than that!" covering her face with her handkerchief, and sobbing.

"Pet, dear! don't cry like this," said the parson, getting up and standing over her. "Pet! I'm ready to do anything in the world for you; to protect you against anyone! Trust to me, dear! I wish I weren't a parson and I'd horsewhip the monster as sure as fate! Think of me as your old master, Pet! Old Cousin Bart, who used to be so severe with the lessons! Only to think we should all

have been away, and you in the house alone! If it had been planned, it couldn't have been better done! I never knew anything so unfortunate. Dear Pet!" he said, taking her hand, "tell Cousin Bart all about it: and let us see what can be done."

"He said he was my father," said Pet, still sobbing.

"Your father!"

"Yes, and something worse than that!"

"What a wicked monster!"

"And if I don't send him some money by Tuesday morning he says he'll let all the world know that I'm—I'm—Oh! Cousin Bart!" she said again covering her face, "you won't despise me, will you?"

"Despise you, dear child! no, why should I?"

"But he says I'm illegitimate!"

“And if he does, no matter. He’s probably lying. But if it’s the truth, it makes no difference to me. You’re my dear little cousin, and the daughter of my dearest friend, and you’ll always be so, unless you choose to alter the relationship.”

“Papa won’t despise me, will he?”

“Of course not. Why, we love you for what you are; not for your parents’ sake!”

“But when people find it out—oh, dear! Perhaps they know it now! Do you think anyone does know it, Cousin Bart?”

This was a difficult question to answer. The parson did not like telling a lie, and he was unprepared with an excuse. He hesitated for a moment.

“Really—er—I—I don’t see how they should.”

“Oh, Cousin Bart! I’m sure they do

by the way you answer. I was afraid he'd told Miss Green."

"Miss Green?" said the parson in astonishment. "What does he know about her?"

"She was having lunch with him in London the other day, in the same place as papa and I were."

"Then that is the gentleman there's been so much talk about with Fanny the last few days?"

"Yes!"

"Good heavens! I begin to understand it all. It *has* been planned. What a wicked thing! And she'd asked you to see some woman this afternoon?"

"Yes; Mrs. Miles."

"And the woman interfered when you screamed?"

"Yes, I hadn't finished speaking to her, so I told her to wait; and I thought as I was going to see a stranger all alone,

I'd like some one near : so I made her sit by the door."

"How fortunate ! And she seems to have made good use of her arms !"

"Yes : she knocked him down."

"Dear soul ! she shan't go without her reward. Poor Pet ! What a dreadful time you must have had of it ! I daresay it wasn't true, but what a monster the man must be in any case !"

"What shall I do, Cousin Bart ? I can't face anyone, I really can't." She broke down again.

"Now look here, Pet dear ! you must try and be a bit brave, you really must. We must write to papa—"

"And I'm afraid it will spoil his enjoyment."

"But he wouldn't forgive me, if I didn't let him know. We'll tell him everything, and ask what's to be done :

and he's sure not to keep us long in suspense. Meanwhile you must be a brave girl. Try and go on the same as if nothing had happened! You will get quite ill if you shut yourself up."

"But Cousin Fanny will want to know all about it; I'm sure she will."

"I'll tell Fanny the subject's not to be mentioned. She'll do what I ask her. Now if you look like that Cousin Bart will be very unhappy, Pet. You must try to cheer up, and wait patiently till we hear from your father."

"Shall I send some money to that dreadful man?"

"By no means. Don't let him think you're frightened. Did he give you his address?"

"Yes, here it is," said Pet, taking it out of her pocket.

“Ah! you’d better give it to me. I shall send it to Thorn, and he’ll probably have him watched by the police. So you needn’t fear another visit from him.”

“However did Miss Green know anything about him, do you think, Cousin Bart?”

“I can’t guess. It seems strange. But I believe she was completely in your mother’s confidence.”

“Oh, dear, how dreadful it is to belong to such odd kind of people! I wish you were my real cousin, and papa my real father. I should be so proud of you both.”

“My dear child, we love you just as much as though you really belonged to us; don’t we, Pet? I’m sure I love you more than all the rest of my cousins put together.”

“But I don’t want that, Cousin Bart.

I want to feel that I really belong to some one who is good and nice; that I can claim love by right of blood."

"But we don't always love our relations best!"

"No, I didn't love my mother; I couldn't!"

"Why, you are a discontented little girl to want anyone else, when you've got Thorn and Ackerman and myself all ready to do anything for you; and Fanny loves you the same as if you were really her cousin——"

"But she won't when she hears this."

"Nonsense! she has her little fancies, but she won't be so silly as that!"

"Does she know, Cousin Bart?"

"N—no, my dear," said the parson, who felt that for once he might be forgiven for telling a direct lie, in consideration of Pet's miserable condition.

In the meantime, Fanny Broderick had

not been over-pleased at Pet's wish for an interview with her brother. It was great affliction, she said, and only from a love of the society of men that she must needs see him. So when the parson re-appeared, she was not in the best of tempers. But when her old enemy, Miss Green, was mentioned, she was ready to listen to anything.

"I begin to think, Fanny," said the parson, "that you're not far wrong in your estimate of Miss Green's character."

"Why, what's the matter?" said Fanny; "is it all false what she says?"

"It may be or may not; but the wretch who came this afternoon is the man who was lunching with Miss Green in London."

"Never!" said Fanny.

"He is! And he's evidently a most disreputable character—a man who ought not to go unchanged."

“Why, Thorn says they seemed to be on the most intimate terms, and she was drinking from his glass.”

“There’s some plot. What the man says may be true or, may not—there’s no knowing. But he tells the same tale that Miss Green does, and declares himself to be Pet’s father, and says he wants money to keep him quiet.”

“But he evidently hasn’t been quiet,” said Miss Courtley.

“He probably told Miss Green as a secret, unless she had heard it before from Pet’s mother,” said the parson.

“Well,” said Fanny, “it’s a most extraordinary affair. I should like to get to the bottom of it.”

“I should say, Fan,” said the parson, “that you for one have been duped by Miss Green. She evidently meant to get you and Edith out of the way, and made me the dupe by which it was managed.

I remember now how anxious she was for me to go to town, and how she begged me to persuade you both to go and help with the decorations."

"Oh, the sly wretch. Yes, and I see now why she wrote and asked Pet to see a woman at a quarter to four; of course that was when the man came. There now! didn't I tell you? I knew there was something up. But I'll be even with her yet; she shan't hoax me for nothing and make a tool of me to carry out her schemes."

"Don't talk like that, Fan. Leave her to her fate. The unjust always meet with their due."

"It's all very well to talk like that, Bart, but I mean to have my revenge."

"The man is probably an impostor, who has found a tool in Miss Green," said Miss Courtley. "It is curious how

people of her character who are always plotting and planning against others are often outwitted themselves. She may be the dupe of the man."

"Very probable!" said the parson. "At any rate, Edith, I'm sure you'll see it is a trying position for the poor girl; and you'll do all you can to keep her from feeling it till we hear what Thorn says. I'm going to write to him myself to-morrow."

"And I'm sure, Bart," said Fanny, "it's a most trying position for the family; for of course it's all over the place by this time, and I declare I shan't know how to look people in the face. I don't see how we can go to church."

"Nonsense, Fan! Don't appear to know anything about it! Miss Green will only be the more triumphant if you all keep at home. Better let Pet do as she likes about going out, only you won't

leave her alone in the house for five minutes or let her out in the grounds alone, will you, Edith?"

"No; I'll take care of her."

"And, Fanny," said her brother, "I must insist on it that you won't mention the subject to Pet, or say a single word that approaches it in any way."

"I don't see how I can help it, considering we can think of nothing else."

"Fanny, I tell you, you must not. The child will get a nervous fever if we don't take care."

"You seem to think a great deal more about her than us, Bart! and considering how we're compromised if——"

"Nonsense, Fanny! We're all old enough to look at the matter from a common-sense point of view. If the thing's true, the child will suffer enough in feeling without our adding to her

sufferings. Do have a little Christian grace about you, Fan, and treat her as you'd like to be treated in the same position."

"I in the same position! I wouldn't be for the world! I'd die first."

"Oh, you dreadful little Pharisee, Fan!"

"At any rate," said Fanny, "if I promise to say nothing to Pet, I won't promise to let Miss Green off. I'll have my revenge!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE Captain regaled himself with various glasses of brandy on his way to London, and did not reach Paddington station till late at night. He was disappointed with his day's work, and was inclined to quarrel with everyone he met. With a sort of drunken instinct he made his way to Mrs. Carey's, and she, seeing the condition he was in, thought it better to admit him, as he would probably make a disturbance if she did not.

“Well, Laura,” he said, “sinking into an easy chair in a little room at the back

of the house, which was Mrs. Carey's private apartment; "here you are! I'm glad to get back! I'm beastly tired, and haven't had time to get a mouthful all day."

"Why, wherever have you been?"

"Where have I been?" he said, talking in the thick voice of a drunken man. "Why, to see the little girl, to be sure."

"Little girl! What girl?"

"Oh, yes! I know! Of course I didn't mention it! A friend of mine, you know, her daughter."

"Now then, Captain, tell me what you've been doing. I know you've been up to something, for you've never been here for nearly a week. I suppose you've been flush of money, or I should have seen you before this. You know where to come to when you want anything."

“And very nice too, my dear—very nice indeed. Charming woman, and good cook. What more could a fellow wish? Might be a trifle younger; but you can’t get beauty and cookery too, as I always say.”

“Captain Carstairs! You’re forgetting yourself. You’ve had too much to drink again. This is the third time you’ve come to my house in this state. You’re going back to your old tricks!”

“Old tricks, my dear! What tricks? What are you driving at? Me been drinking? Well, as I told you, I haven’t been eating. The beastly train was so early. I hadn’t time to dress myself properly; and that was a pity! Think I might have got on better with the wench if I’d been up to the nines.”

“You horrid man! where have you been?”

“Been? Where have I been? Why,

didn't I tell you I went to see a friend of mine? Beastly train. Made me sick. Have you got a brandy and soda about the place?"

"No, I haven't. And you've had quite enough. Have a cup of coffee: it'll do you more good."

"Coffee! I don't want coffee! I know you've got the brandy bottle in that cupboard there! Let's have it out!"

"I tell you I haven't."

"That's all my eye! Laura Carey don't go without a drop of brandy. She's too old a bird for that."

"You wicked wretch! I haven't a drop."

"Then send out thingummy to get some."

"The servant has gone to bed."

"Well, go and get a glass, and let's have a drop of soda."

“I’ll ring the bell.”

“But you said thingummy had gone to bed.”

“Well, come down with me; I can’t reach the soda.”

“Oh, you’re a sly one, you are, Laura!”

“You’re a fiend!”

“Call your best friend a fiend? Oh, for shame!”

“Come along and let’s get the soda.”

“All right!” said the Captain, stumbling along.

The soda and a glass were brought.

“Now then, Laura, just put a spoonful of brandy at the bottom.”

“I will not, Sir!”

“Then I’ll smash it.”

“Oh, you wretch! There!” she said, pouring some brandy from a bottle which she took from the cupboard.

“What a good little woman it is! Now then, pop goes the soda! You open it, Laura!”

While she was intent on opening the soda-water in such a way that she should spill none of it, the Captain drank off the brandy.

“I declare you ain’t to be trusted for a moment. Now, as you’ve chosen to drink the brandy first, you may take the soda after.”

“Shall I?” he said, seizing the brandy-bottle and pouring half its contents into the soda. “Not if I know it?”

“I’ll tell you what it is, Captain Carstairs. I won’t stand this much longer. If you’re going to begin your old games again you may leave my house. You’ve no claim on me, and if you come here making a row I shall give you in charge.”

“Dear Laura give me in charge? No she won’t. Oh, no she won’t! I’m coming out grand, and going to take her first floor, and be a swell; and dear Laura will cook nice little dinners.”

“What do you mean, you fool?” said Mrs. Carey. “Why can’t you steady yourself and tell me what you mean?”

“What I mean? Why, that that girl’ll come down handsome. She’s beastly proud, and she’d rather pay the money than be taken down a peg. Her affectionate uncle, and that sort of thing, don’t you see? Managed it capitally; but couldn’t get any of the ready. As proud as a queen, bless your heart! Privy purse carried for her. Nasty, loud-tongued washerwoman interfered. Got a beastly shaking.”

“What are you talking about?” said Mrs. Carey. “Listen to me, Captain!”

she went on, giving him a shake to rouse him. "Do you know what you're saying?"

"Know what I'm saying? Course I do."

"Have you been to Overton?"

"Course I have. Slow train. Slow people——"

"Attend to me! Have you seen the girl?"

"Seen the girl? Oh, of course! I know. Friend of mine. Not your business."

"Captain, look at me. Have you asked that girl for money?"

"Yes; didn't I tell you? Privy purse; hadn't got it; going to send it."

"Did you see Mr. Meadows?"

"Mr. Meadows? Oh, yes. Meadows —Overton Hall."

Mrs. Carey saw it was useless to

pursue her questioning further. She assisted the Captain to a bedroom, and having loosened his shirt-collar and cravat, helped him on to a bed, where she left him.

On Sunday morning, or rather mid-day, when he appeared she made use of what he had said the previous night to show him that she knew he had been to Overton; but he denied it, and said she must have been dreaming.

At any rate she thought it wise to write to Mr. Meadows. So after an early dinner she shut herself in her bedroom, and spent three hours in the production of a letter which was entirely satisfactory to herself, and which she posted.

“Now look here,” she said to Captain Carstairs on Sunday evening, when he was in a weak and miserable state of body, “I’ve written to Mr. Meadows.

If you leave things to me we shall get on all right; but if you spoil my little game, I'll spoil yours. So just you come to me when you want to hear anything about the family; and don't be going off to Overton again, for you'll lose more than you'll gain. You've been up to tricks lately. I know you! But you ain't going to serve me as you did Bella!"

As the Captain was in the most abject state of mind, he could do nothing more than listen, and promise anything that was requested of him.

CHAPTER VII.

FANNY BRODERICK found it very hard to sleep on Saturday night after such disturbing events. She sat up talking it all over with Edith Courtley till the small hours of the morning; and would not have stopped then, had not Edith insisted on going to bed. But what occupied her mind above everything else was her intention of having revenge on Miss Green. If the whole thing were true, Pet was very much to be pitied for the unfortunate circumstances of her birth. But then those who had been brought

in immediate contact with her, were according to Fanny's notions of right and wrong quite as much to be pitied. So instead of being full of sympathy for the poor girl, as her brother and Edith were, she turned her attention to Miss Green, and lay awake thinking how she could best carry out her revenge.

She evidently pleased herself in the matter at last, for she got three or four hours sound sleep before it was time to rise.

Now Fanny Broderick said her prayers at her bedside night and morning, and was altogether quite an orthodox young lady. At least, no one ever questioned whether she were orthodox or not. Had she herself been asked she would most probably have replied that of course she was; that she went to church on Sundays and holy-

days, and said her prayers night and morning.

A little skirmish with Miss Green was part of the routine of life, and it never occurred to Fanny that there was anything contrary to religion in having a little revenge. Perhaps, after all, Fanny's activity in such matters was better for the general good than the Squire's and the parson's passivity. We probably have to thank the Fannys of this world for preventing, in a measure, the aggressiveness of the Miss Greens.

So Miss Fanny Broderick went through her prayers on Sunday morning—rather hurriedly, because she was late—without the least compunction at having planned a little bit of spiteful by-play for the benefit of Miss Green.

Pet had not gained courage to appear at the breakfast-table, and Fanny found that she would have to go to church

by herself. This rather fell in with her plans, as she wanted a chat alone with Miss Green.

It was Miss Green's custom on a Sunday morning to attend at the Sunday-school for half an hour, and then to march along with the children to church, just in time to settle herself at the organ before service began. So Fanny knew it was no good attacking her till afterwards.

She went through the service devoutly, confessing that she had done what she ought not to have done, and left undone what she ought to have done; but she didn't include the item against Miss Green.

"Nasty old wretch!" she thought, as she looked up from her prayer-book and watched her pressing with all her might on the very indifferent instrument that accompanied the voices of the

good people of Overton; "I believe she's got up the whole plot out of spite!"

The parson preached one of what Thornton Meadows would call his pretty little sermons, impressing on his flock that the key-note of the Christian religion was love, and that it was only by loving one another, and making sacrifices for one another, that they could be good Christians. But Fanny was so familiar with sermons and sermon-making that she paid little heed. She had learnt by experience that providing a sermon was the chief nuisance in a clergyman's life; the something to be got over and done with as soon as possible; that it might be very well for those to listen for whom it was written; but for herself—well, she claimed a sort of proprietorship with the makers! for had she not had to rummage through her father's sermons very often, and

sometimes her lover's and her brother's, to find a suitable one on occasions when there had been no time to write one? Going to church every Sunday and holy-day she considered to be the especial duty of a parson's daughter or wife; for the church must be kept up and a good example set.

Also the distinct repetition of prayers and responses she by no means neglected, and as others began gradually to weary and drop the responses, her voice would be heard above the rest. Except, as she said, she did sometimes forget the "O Lord, arise!" at the end of the Litany because it was such a long pull to go straight through it. But when sermon time came Fanny considered she had earned her repose, so she used to settle herself comfortably in her seat and consider her various little schemes for the week, for she was a very industrious

woman, and always had plenty to occupy her time and thoughts.

Therefore her brother's precepts about love and kindness were not noticed.

Fanny retained her seat while the people went out and Miss Green played the voluntary; then as Miss Green walked out she followed.

"Oh, Miss Green," said Fanny, shaking hands at the church door, "have you heard the news? We've been in such excitement at the Hall."

"No. What is it?"

"Do you mean to say you haven't heard about yesterday afternoon, and how Mrs. Miles distinguished herself?"

"Mrs. Miles! Ah! that was the woman I sent. I was hoping to see Miss Meadows to inquire whether she'd been."

"Been! I should think she had, and

a very fortunate thing too. We're quite indebted to her."

"Why, whatever happened?" said Miss Green, the triumphant look she had carried about all the morning, changing to one of bewilderment.

"And it was so fortunate, too, as Edith and I were out. It really looked as if the whole thing had been planned; but luckily Mrs. Miles was there, or there's no knowing what might have happened—perhaps murder."

"Whatever was it? You quite alarm me. I hope Miss Meadows is safe!"

"Yes, thanks to Mrs. Miles, she is! But of course it was rather a shock, and we persuaded her to keep quiet to-day. You remember, don't you, that you asked us to come round to help you yesterday with the decorations?"

"Yes."

“And you asked Cousin Pet to see a woman just after?”

“Yes,” said Miss Green, wishing Fanny would go on faster. But Fanny’s object was to work Miss Green up into a state of alarm, and also show her that she suspected her.

“Well, Mrs. Miles had just come up to the Hall, and was in—there’s Bart waiting for me—” the parson had just come out by the vestry door. “Don’t wait, Bart,” said Fanny, walking towards him; “I’m just telling Miss Green about that shocking affair between Mrs. Miles and the intoxicated stranger. You go on to the Hall; I daresay you’ll find them in the grounds, for Edith said the sunshine would do Pet good; I’ll follow you in a few minutes.”

Then turning again to Miss Green she said, “Let me see, I’d come to where

Mrs. Miles had arrived; I must go straight through, because we feel sure there's some conspiracy about it, and I want you to see just how it happened. Mrs. Miles was in the workshop, you know, with Cousin Pet, when James announced a visitor to see Miss Meadows. This is just as we heard it from Mrs. Miles, who was sent for again last night, that what she knew about it might be taken down for the benefit of the police."

Miss Green began to look uncomfortable.

"Dear me! you're shivering! and I'm keeping you in this shady corner. How thoughtless of me! I'm always so warm myself that I forget everyone else is not. Let us walk slowly up the road, for that'll be in your way as well as mine. Well—let me see, where was I? We took down Mrs. Miles's story for the police

—no, that was later on in the evening.”

“A visitor arrived, you said!”

“Oh, yes! of course! A visitor. He came in a fly, you know, a hired fly from Abington; and Cousin Pet went in, thinking of course it was a gentleman—not a common intoxicated wretch, as he appeared to be. It shows how careful we ought to be, Miss Green, doesn’t it? Really, as I said to Edith, I shall never dare to go and see any stranger that calls on me when I’m married. I shall be sure to think of yesterday afternoon. And clergymen so often have strangers calling on them. I call it positively alarming. You’re never safe anywhere, it seems to me, not even in your own drawing-room.”

“But what happened?” said Miss Green, impatiently.

“Well, Cousin Pet went in, as I said;

and the man went on in a dreadful way about wanting money and being some relation—of course he's an impostor—and he threatened all sorts of things if she didn't give him some money at once, and the poor girl was dreadfully frightened, and then he seized hold of her, and what he wanted to do no one knows for she screamed with all her might, and Mrs. Miles—but there I've forgotten to tell you one part"—said the aggravating Fanny, watching her companion's face to see the effect her tale was creating—"I must go back to where Mrs. Miles and Cousin Pet were in the workshop, and Cousin Pet was trying to find out what was the matter with the woman's husband, and what he fancied, so that she might know what to send; for she really is such a good-hearted girl, and will take any trouble in the world for anyone; and she said to Mrs. Miles—

and the woman herself told us this—she said ‘You sit down here and wait,’ and then she went across the hall and came back again and said, ‘No; don’t sit there, in case I forget you; come and sit by this door;’ and we think Cousin Pet must have done this on purpose, because Mrs. Miles says she looked ‘frightened-like’ when she said it. Well—wasn’t it a good thing? Where was I?”

“Miss Meadows screamed.”

“Oh, of course! She screamed as loudly as ever she could, and Mrs. Miles she was up in a minute and in the drawing-room and knocked the man down before he knew where he was: and he was so hurt, he couldn’t get up, he called for brandy—and there was such a terrible set out. Cousin Pet fainted in Mrs. Miles’s arms and had to be carried up to bed, and all the household was in such a state, you never saw such a

commotion as there was all the evening."

"And the man—what became of him?"

"The man?" said Fanny standing still, for they were nearing the Hall gates, and looking up into Miss Green's face. "Oh, nobody cared what became of him. Mrs. Miles's account is that she helped him off the floor, and ordered him to get into the fly and be off, and if he wanted brandy he could find it at the village inn."

"Then he went away?"

"Yes, I suppose so. We've got an address he gave Cousin Pet where he wanted money sent, and we should have set the police on him at once, but we thought we wouldn't do that sort of thing on a Sunday, so my brother will go up to London to-morrow, and go to Scotland Yard at once and give informa-

tion against him, for trying to extort money by threats : I think that is what it's called. From what we hear we think there is some female in the matter." Fanny considered this last sentence, which she had copied from the newspapers, a stroke of genius on her part.

"How do you mean?" said Miss Green, nervously.

"Well, the man's been seen about with some woman in London. I believe Cousin Pet knows who the woman is; but she won't give her name: which is very natural, poor thing, for if the man should turn out to be some poor relation, of course it will be dreadfully awkward to prosecute. And the woman might be a relation too—his wife perhaps. My brother says he's sure it's a plot, and he can see the whole thing as clearly as possible: but he won't tell us, because he says women talk so. So you'll keep this to yourself, won't you?

I mean the part about the police ; because if everyone knows, the man might get to hear that the police are after him, and run away. And of course we should like to catch him, don't you see ? But you look very chilly, and I'm keeping you standing. I call the sun warm myself, but perhaps you don't feel it so. Good morning."

Miss Green did not appear either at the Sunday school or church that afternoon, and a younger sister who took her duties, informed Fanny Broderick that the poor thing was suffering from a very bad headache.

Fanny subsequently learned through the medium of Keziah, whose present drudge was the daughter of the Reedlands' coachman, that Miss Green drove on Sunday afternoon to Abington to get some medicine, and that she posted a letter at the Abington office.

“Oh, yes!” said Fanny to Edith; “you may depend on it when she writes to her beautiful lover, she doesn’t let Miss Royds catch a sight of the envelope. She knows better than that.”

CHAPTER VIII.

IT has been said that no one who possesses an income of five hundred a year need find any difficulties in life. No doubt a thoroughly selfish man might manage to take life tolerably easy with a secured income to that amount. But Talleyrand, with his oft-quoted phrase of a hard heart and a strong stomach, was probably nearer to the source of success. Poverty in a civilized country is perhaps the worst of all curses. Five hundred pounds a year will at least save a man from the terrors

of it ; but any amount of money does not seem to smooth all the difficulties of life.

Thornton Meadows, when he succeeded to the family property and estate, was by no means unappreciative of the enjoyments which money could bring. He was perhaps more fortunate than most men ; for while on the one hand he had no temptation to indulge in pleasures that would squander the money and debase both body and mind, on the other he was not burdened with any sense of responsibility concerning his position. He simply wanted to enjoy himself in his own way ; and he could have done this with as many hundreds as he had thousands.

Still he enjoyed the sense of power the money gave him. He had for so many years been worried by his father and aunt, and more particularly the latter,

as to the profession he would adopt, that it was an intense relief to him to know that he positively had nothing to do. This was not from a mere love of idleness. In one sense he was perhaps an idle man. He was too fond of looking on at the world, rather than acting in it.

Like many another young man, he found the world out of joint; but he did not feel called upon to exclaim with Hamlet on the cursed spite that brought him into it to set it right. Thornton Meadows had no intention of setting it right; he meant simply to look on. He had recognised the fact that life was unsatisfactory, and he determined to make the best of it. But in making the best of it, he had no idea of merely gratifying his physical senses. If he took no part in the world, at any rate he liked to

study it—in men, in nature, and in books.

For four or five years he lived happily enough. Money had certainly brought him some enjoyment. It brought him the companionship of his cousin, and it gave him time and opportunity for that on-looking at the world which had become almost a passion with him. But the “hard heart” of Talleyrand was wanting, so trouble slipped in, and there was an end to the freedom and happiness that had been as it were planned and carried out.

“What a strange thing it is, Ackerman,” said Thornton Meadows to his companion on the day that he had received Pet’s and Broderick’s letter, “that one is always thwarted in all one’s plans in this world!”

“Yes, my dear fellow : Fate is always supervening.”

“It seems to me that no one can ever really count on happiness for any length of time. You may have as much money as you like and every prospect of enjoyment, and then something comes to disturb it.”

“It’s the old story. As the French say, ‘Man proposes and God disposes.’”

“And the more you propose for yourself, the more things are disposed for you.”

“Exactly so!”

“Do you know I once cut out enjoyment for myself, and I gained it too: had five thoroughly happy years; but I believe I have to pay for every day of that time, for things always go wrong with me now.”

“I also schemed happiness for myself, and got it; pure happiness: such as I believe mortals never have: but it went away like a shadow, and, as you say, I paid dearly for it.”

“You were even less fortunate than I. Happiness with me now comes very much as fine weather does in winter. You bask in the sun and enjoy it, but feel all the time that you’ll have to pay for it with cold east winds later on.”

“Just so! One cannot count on it any more than on the weather. That mythical personage, the clerk of the weather, behaves very much like that other mythical personage, Fate. It’s a strange world!”

“Yes, strange enough! So strange and so unsatisfactory that one likes to fancy there really is a prospect of things being differently arranged elsewhere. One can’t tell. Now, it’s knowing such men as you, Ackerman, that makes me feel there is a mystical and intangible part of us, what is generally called the spirit. I knew you at once, that is

spiritually. I seemed to have known you for ages when I first saw you. Even in the flesh there's something about you that seems familiar. I've thought over it often, and sometimes just a flash of memory comes ; but before it shapes itself it's gone. Do you ever experience that sort of thing ?"

"Oh, yes ! often. Perhaps we know each other in some other planet, eh?" said Ackerman smiling.

"Ah ! And at that rate we shouldn't carry memory from this. And after all there are some things I should not like to forget."

"But there's a great deal one would !"

"True enough ! There's one woman I'd rather forget !"

"And I also !"

"In fact I may say there are two, for Miss Green's a nightmare to me."

“But she doesn’t trouble you personally, does she?”

“I’ve never allowed her to more than I can help. But it’s astonishing how venomous a woman of that sort can be out of mere love of mischief. I’ve had a note this morning in which I’m told of a diabolical plot she has concocted. And all for mere sport, I believe.”

“Do you suppose mean creatures of that sort have an immortal spirit, Meadows?”

“I can’t say. I never understood their use in creation any more than I do that of blackbeetles or the *pulex irritans*, or the animals with which we become familiar in seaside lodging-houses.”

“They are what you might call living dirt, to warn us of the danger of uncleanness; and I suppose such creatures as Miss Green are the dirt of humanity,

who warn us of the danger of being spiritually unclean. No wonder that all ages have recognised the necessity of making a continual search after religion that shall best develop what is good in us. It would indeed be a terrible world if peopled only with the worst part of humanity. After all, the Miss Greens amongst us don't entirely hold sway."

"No; but they do an immense amount of mischief. That woman took the advantage of my absence the moment I was gone. You know when I started with you, Ackerman, I felt it would freshen me up a bit and do me good, though I feel that it's at your expense, because I'm a miserable companion for you——"

"My dear Meadows, don't say so—don't say such a thing! I couldn't wish a better. Your mood suits me!

I think myself lucky in having such a friend as yourself!"

"But I know I'm moody and uncertain——"

"So am I—so am I. You can't be worse than I am."

"I've had a good deal of trouble the last few years, and trouble tells on me. People say I have an enviable position, but——"

"So you have; but of course one can never judge from outward circumstances; each knows his own trouble best. Perhaps my life is not so enviable as it appears to be. If I were to say out all that is in my heart now, I think perhaps I might astonish even you."

"And I'm sure I could astonish you. But I'll not turn confessor, or be confessed. What I wanted to tell you is that I've had news to-day which must alter our plans; in fact, Ackerman, I'm afraid you'll be dreadfully annoyed with

me, but I think I really must go home at once?"

"Go home? Has anything happened?"

"Nothing that I need bother you with, my dear fellow! it's simply a bit of family business."

"Something unexpected?"

"Yes, quite."

"And you couldn't manage it by post or telegraph?"

"No; I'm afraid not."

"Nor by deputy?"

"Well, no; I'm a little anxious about it personally."

"Your daughter quite well, I hope?"

"No, not exactly; she's a little upset."

"Yes?" said Ackerman anxiously.

"You see she's rather nervous and sensitive."

"Extremely so!"

"And as she's the only relation, as

I may call her, in whom I'm particularly interested, I'm naturally rather anxious about her."

"Of course. But is she taken ill?"

"Not exactly. As I said before she's had a shock to the nerves."

"Yes?" said Ackerman eagerly.

"And she's not like most girls of her age. She's seen a good deal of trouble. In fact, poor child, she has shared my troubles, as well as bearing her own; and this has perhaps drawn us closer together than is the case with parents and children generally."

"We'd better go back at once, hadn't we, Meadows?"

"I don't see that I need take you back. I was wondering whether, if she were well enough, I had better bring her out here to join us."

"That would be pleasant for her."

"But I don't know whether the

business won't keep me some time."

"Couldn't I help you in it?"

"No, thanks; you're very kind; but I must attend to it myself.

"But there's no cause for alarm about your daughter's health, I hope? You know, Meadows, I'm interested in the child, and—I was going to say am as anxious about her as yourself."

"No; she seems all right at present; but—Ackerman! I'm sure you must think it is ridiculous for me to be so concerned about that child. You know she has been everything to me for the last few years. You could probably see how much she was to me—when—when I was forced to call a demon in human shape my wife. And now that I am free—free to marry again as people remind me—in fact I'm told that it's my duty to marry; that is to say it's my duty to make myself miserable for the sake

of some unborn child, because I happen to possess a certain estate; now that I am free, as I say, I don't seem to be able to turn my heart elsewhere. The child consoled me, and was all in all to me; and she is all in all to me still."

"I can quite understand it," said Ackerman, with a heavy sigh. "I wish I had such consolation! It is all I ask for; but I can't get it. After all, Meadows, you are more fortunate than I. What would I give for such a daughter?"

"But then I must lose her one day!"

"But you needn't meet evil half way. At any rate you've got her."

"Do you know, Ackerman, she quite illustrates what we were saying just now; and in two ways——"

"How so?"

“Well, I saw that child under very strange circumstances, and I took to her at once; I seemed to know her, spiritually, as I say. But I paid for her very dearly, for when I look back on it I can see I really married the mother for the sake of the child.”

“Really?”

“I did indeed! The mother worked upon me through the child; and my aunt was foolish enough to cast imputations on the mother’s character because of my fondness for the child; the woman appealed to me—what could I do?”

“Yes; I know well enough. I can sympathize most truly.”

“It was a strange story altogether, Ackerman. In my susceptible days, when I was loafing about at home just before I went to Oxford, I fell desperately in love with the sweetest woman I ever saw.

She was a young artist's wife," Ackerman started; "don't think I was dishonourable! I merely admired at a distance. I never spoke to her. She was the loveliest woman I have ever seen! Not a fine-lady style of woman, with airs and graces, but a natural, simple, queen-like creature, such as one fancies Nausikaa to have been. I'd loved many times before; at least I fancied I had; but I was in earnest now. I could have worshipped that woman. At any rate, I supposed she saved me from falling a victim to the first woman that came in my way, for she became my ideal, and I compared every woman with her."

"What became of her," said Ackerman, his voice trembling a little.

"Her fate was a sad one, and that perhaps fixed her image in my mind more than ever."

"Yes?"

“She died in childbirth, in our neighbourhood, and was buried in our little churchyard. Have you noticed a little marble cross, Ackerman, to Olivia Arnold, just as you go round the corner of the church?”

“Yes.”

“The poor girl was buried there; and her husband—he was a mere boy, and I heard was nearly mad at his loss—ordered a little cross to be placed. I don’t think he was rich, poor fellow, and I took the liberty of interfering with his order, and caused the cross to be carved in marble, and I’ve kept the grave up ever since. I often wonder what became of the poor fellow. He visited the grave occasionally for a year or two, and I daresay was puzzled about the marble; but I bribed the mason to secrecy.” Ackerman had walked to the window, and stood with his back to his companion. “However,

what I was going to tell you," went on the Squire, "is that the moment I saw my stepdaughter I was struck with the likeness to my ideal. I always said I should marry when I came across a woman like the artist's wife. But of course I couldn't marry a little child; and unfortunately I married the mother instead. It's a strange story, isn't it, Ackerman?"

"Strange indeed!" said Ackerman, still seeming to look out of window.

"And now you can understand that I am attached to the child in no ordinary way."

"I can."

"And you must forgive me for suddenly leaving you in this unceremonious fashion; for I am really very anxious about her."

"I wish you'd let me share your anxiety, Meadows. You know how much

I have taken to the child, and how she has come to regard me as a relation. I should be only too glad to be of service in the matter. I'd rather come back with you, than remain here; for, to tell the truth, I feel anxious myself."

"It's purely a family matter; I don't see that you can do any good; however, I might as well tell you what it is, perhaps, for in a small place like Overton nothing remains a secret, and you're sure to hear of it; and it seems to have caused quite a commotion. You see, Pet has been acknowledged as the mistress of the Hall for some time past; and, although quite a girl, is regarded with some interest in the neighbourhood; so that if she becomes a subject of gossip in any way, it's likely to be unpleasant for her. For myself, I don't

care a bit what is said, but when she is attacked——”

“You don’t mean to say that dear child has been made a subject for scandal by that witch-like woman, Miss Green!”

“I’m afraid Miss Green has got hold of a bit of family history that is only too true; and is probably making use of it in a manner that will bring a great deal of annoyance to Pet, and in fact to all of us.”

“Did I understand you it was connected with your own family, or your step-daughter’s.”

“With hers.”

“Then I think, Meadows, you’d better be influenced by the old saw, ‘Two heads are better than one.’ Let me into your confidence; and perhaps you’ll find I can be of more use than you imagine.”

“It’s really very kind of you to be so much interested in the child, Ackerman! I’ll fetch her letter.”

CHAPTER IX.

“THIS is what the child says, Ackerman—‘You will wonder why I didn’t write to-day in time for post, but you’ll soon learn. It’s now midnight, and I’m going to sit up for ever so long to tell you about something that happened to-day, and I don’t want to tell you all at once; because I think you will be horrified. You will start back in disgust for a moment, I’m sure you will; and I want you not to feel any disgust about me even for a moment. For just a little time I thought it might make you cast me off—only a little time. But Cousin Bart

said he was sure it would make no difference to you, and it didn't to him either. You know you are all the world to me, dear papa. I couldn't live if you sent me away,'—you know, Ackerman, these are no mere words, she really is attached to me," said the Squire.

"I know it!" almost groaned Ackerman.

"‘And,’ she goes on, ‘you must be prepared to hear something very dreadful about my relations, and yet try and think of me still as your own Pet. You love me for myself, don't you, dear? and if you find out that my mother was even worse than you thought, and that my father—but, oh! that's the worst part of it. I can hardly bear to write about it yet—do feel for me, dear papa! I was so terribly frightened this afternoon. It has made me so ill. I turn faint every time I think of it. I was all alone, just

going to write to you, when I was told a gentleman had called to see *me*. Captain Carstairs was on the card; and I felt quite pleased at first, for I thought it might be a relation. But I was just a little nervous, because I had to see him all alone; and the thought came all of a sudden that it might be an impostor wanting to get money. I found that horrible man we saw with Miss Green in London! Can you imagine my fright? I was about to rush out of the room, but he told me I had better wait——”

“The scoundrel!” said Ackerman, whose face had turned pale, and his deep-set eyes were flashing with anger.

“‘And then, papa! oh, I’m sure you’ll understand what I feel! I count on your sympathy, darling papa!—you know how I have always wished I had some nice *real* relations! I know I’m lucky

enough to be adopted by you, but it would be so nice to be related by blood to some good, honest people, even if they were only quite in a low class—so you can guess my horror when this fearful-looking wretch said he was my father; and—what is worse, if anything could be worse—that I'm illegitimate.' ”

“It's a lie!” said Ackerman in a voice of thunder.

The Squire was so startled that he dropped the letter.

“No, my dear fellow,” said the Squire shaking his head. “I knew this before. I'm afraid it's too true.”

“It's a lie, Meadows! *I* am her father!” said Ackerman with fierce energy.

“*You* her father. Good heavens, Ackerman! Do you know what you are saying?”

“Yes,” said Ackerman, the passion leaving him, and his voice trembling with emotion; “after what that poor child says I can keep the secret no longer. It would be cruel to her! She is my own daughter, and I’ll soon supply the proof.”

The Squire was silent with astonishment.

“Good God, Ackerman!” he said presently, “why ever haven’t you told me this before?”

“I have been going to tell you ever since the day I first saw you; but I haven’t had the heart to take her away from you. I have persuaded you to leave England with me, solely with the hope that I might wean you from her, and then take her myself. Meadows! you don’t know how I’ve been eating my heart out with envy all these months. When the—*that woman* died, I hoped

you would turn your thoughts to marrying again, and give up my little girl to me; but you know so far you have shown me that you could not give her up."

"Then that woman was not my wife?"

"As to that I don't think we need trouble. She claimed that the marriage was valid because she had not heard of me for more than seven years. I don't know the law on the subject; and really don't care to inquire. She's dead, and I don't suppose either of us cares to claim her, so it can't matter to us."

"But it matters very much to me, Ackerman, whether Pet's my step-daughter or not. I must have the validity of the marriage inquired into."

"As to whether she's your step-daughter or not, I can settle at once

for you. I'm sorry to disappoint you in the matter, Meadows—sorry to take away even your legal right to her—though I leave you the richer of us after all; for you have her love: I am merely the author of her being.”

“How do you mean you can settle it?”

“Well, if I must disappoint you by telling you that she is no relation to you whatsoever, at least I shall please you, I think, when I say that *that woman* was not her mother. The dear girl need fret at that no longer!”

“Then she's your daughter by your first wife?”

“She is!”

“And I'm no relation at all,” said the Squire, looking radiant, to the surprise of his companion.

“None whatever, that I can see; unless your marriage was valid, and then you

were her stepmother's husband. But that's too far off to count at all, I think," said Ackerman laughing.

"Ackerman, my dear fellow!" said the Squire, holding out his hand and looking happier than his companion had ever seen him, "let me congratulate you on having a most charming daughter! I freely give her up to you."

"You freely give her up to me?" said Ackerman astonished.

"Yes freely and willingly. I only make one condition—"

"Yes?"

"That when we reach home you'll wait one whole day before you claim her?"

"Certainly," said Ackerman, wondering why the Squire was in such good spirits about it.

"I should like one day for saying good-bye."

“But perhaps she won’t come to me, Meadows !”

“She will if I tell her !”

“But we mustn’t force her, Meadows. Perhaps she’ll learn to love me by degrees.”

“I’m sure she does love you already. She took to you by instinct, you see ! And how delighted she’ll be when she hears you are really related to her. How strange it all is ! When I look back on it I can understand so much ! You know I thought at one time you were in love with her ! Fancy that ! Her own father ! I even spoke to her about it, for as she’s so young it occurred to me she might be thoughtless in the matter, and engage your affection without meaning anything beyond friendship herself. How delighted she’ll be !”

“Do you think she will ? It’s very kind of you to take it in this cheerful way. I

was afraid it would be a very great trouble to you ; but after that pathetic little letter I could keep it no longer. If she can never love me as much as you, at any rate she shall know she had honest parents."

"But however did it all come about, Ackerman? How came you to lose sight of her?"

"That wretched woman drove me out of the country, Meadows. You knew her, and can perhaps sympathize with me. I might have borne with her as you did had I been older: but I was a mere lad, and was smarting under the loss of the sweetest woman that ever lived. She drove me mad—I couldn't stay with her."

"How did you pick her up?"

"I had lodged with her and her sister, and they took the child when my wife died and brought it up, and before six

months were gone the woman had compelled me to marry her. I really was hardly accountable for my actions at that time, I can assure you, Meadows."

"I can well understand it."

"I lived with her about two years in the utmost misery. I longed to go away and forget my trouble. I had a slender fortune of four thousand pounds. I tied up one thousand on the child, the interest only to be used for her benefit. I gave two thousand to my wife, and with the other thousand left the country, and went to Australia."

"That is evidently what this scoundrel alludes to. Pet says here, 'He says there is a sum of money belonging to me to which he considers he has a right. Do you know anything about it?'"

"Oh! thereby hangs a tale! That woman—whom I hate to call by my own

name, and I imagine you have no wish for her to be called by yours—gave out that the child was dead, and even the certificate of death was produced when the solicitor made over the money. You can imagine my feeling, when, returning from Australia with a yearning that had been gradually growing on me to see the child, I heard from the lawyer that she was dead. That accounts for the child having been led to believe that she was the daughter of Carstairs and the woman.”

“Good heavens, the woman was a common felon then. But how is it this man Carstairs asks for the money if he knows it has been already appropriated?”

“She took the money, she told me, because Carstairs deserted her after having spent every penny of her money;

leaving her also at a lodging very much in debt."

"And how did you find out that she was not dead?"

"I saw her!"

"Saw her! where?"

"At the Cottage."

"The Cottage, Ackerman? How do you mean?"

"Don't you remember that morning when you were wandering--"

"Of course! How very strange! But who told you she was your daughter?"

"I knew it the moment I saw her, at least I saw the likeness to her mother then. Meadows, I'll show you something, if you'll be patient a minute while I unbutton my waistcoat." He presently produced a locket which was attached to a cord that hung round his neck, and opened it.

“Who is that?” he asked.

“Why, Ackerman! Is it possible? It’s Olivia Arnold! My dear fellow!” he said taking his hand, “are you the young artist?”

“I was once, Meadows!”

“By Jove, this is a dream surely! I shall wake up presently and find you vanished, and nothing of the story left except the little marble cross.”

“No: it’s true enough: and sad enough in one sense! We’ve both had trouble; but let us hope, now that woman has gone, we shall both be happier.”

“And Pet——”

“Whose name is Olivia.”

“Ah! how delighted she’ll be, poor child! We must telegraph to her, Ackerman. By the way, you’re Arnold, of course. I’m afraid I shall not easily get used to the new name.”

“I am Arthur Ackerman Arnold ; three A’s, as the boys at school called me.”

“Then was that day you came to look over the Cottage the first you knew of Pet being alive?”

“Yes, I was going up to the churchyard to see the grave, and passing the Cottage, was tempted to go in the open door in the wall.”

“How strange these things are! It seems really as if some higher power occasionally looked after us poor mortals.”

“And then you sent me up to your wife, who proved to be my wife.”

“Yes; and that was an odd thing, too! We always leave the letting of the place to the family lawyer. He puts it in the hands of agents, and attends to it entirely, and it was an unusual thing for me to send you up to the Hall. Something

prompted me to do it. Weren't you surprised? What did you do when you saw her?"

"Well, I was a little surprised, because you had distinctly assured me the young lady was your daughter. I felt so convinced when I saw her that she was mine, that I thought I mistook you, and asked you again."

"Yes; I remember! and you mistook her for my wife, and Pet was so delighted," said the Squire, seeming to find pleasure in the remembrance. "Dear child!"

"Well, I walked up to the house, thinking all the way what an extraordinary likeness there was to Olivia—why, look Meadows, this miniature might represent the child almost as well as the mother—and wondering what strange coincidence caused you to have a daughter so exactly like my wife. When I was admitted, the woman didn't know me at first. I've

changed a good bit, Meadows, with my rough life in Australia."

"You have, indeed! I can testify to that; for I don't forget the young artist that I used to follow about with envious eyes."

"But I knew her. I believe if that woman had lived to be a hundred she would never have changed. She looked exactly the same as when I left England. There was the same manner—that soft, smooth, plausible, deliberate way she had—ugh! how I hated it!"

"So did I. She never gave her face the chance of a wrinkle, she was so passionless. What age do you suppose she was?"

"I imagine she was over thirty when I first knew her; but she spoke of herself as younger."

"And what did you do when you recognised her?"

“I plainly told her who I was. She said she had a right to marry again, and I could not claim her back as she had not heard of me for so long. I said all I wanted was my daughter; but that, if when you heard of my return you wished to retain the woman as your wife, and considered that you could legally do so, I should not interfere; or that if you repudiated her I would settle a small sum on her, sufficient to keep her from want. She was inclined to treat me with rather a high hand. She said the child was dead and her marriage was legal. ‘I have just seen the child with my own eyes,’ I said. She attempted for some time to brave it out, but at last she was obliged to admit the truth. I then said I must have the child. She said you were exceedingly fond of it, and were not likely to give it up. After a long tussle she told me of the real state of affairs

between you. I told her the best thing to do at present to avoid any exposure, for I thought it would be unpleasant for you as well as for me, was to go quietly away and leave me to manage matters as best I could. If you would let her take the child with her, well and good; I could soon settle the matter with you; but if you would not give up the child I determined to take the Cottage and watch my opportunity. And you know, Meadows, I never calculated on your being so attached—so obstinately attached—to my daughter as you are! I thought simply to make your acquaintance, and take an opportunity of gently breaking to you the state of affairs, to save scandal, for it would not have been pleasant to have had our names in everyone's mouth as the husbands of a woman that both of us despised."

"It was a difficult position for you,

Ackerman, and you certainly did not study your own feeling in the matter.”

“There’s one point I feel bound in honour to explain. You made the woman a very handsome allowance on her separation from you. Whether she was really your wife or not, I don’t care to inquire, but I did not intend that you should go on paying that money to her without speaking to you on the matter. I was only waiting for an auspicious moment to claim my daughter.”

“My dear Ackerman, you need not trouble about the money.”

“But I do. I feel that I was bound to provide for her. And I am ready to hand over to you her expenses for that year——”

“Nonsense, nonsense, I won’t hear of it !”

“But I knew I couldn’t pay such a sum every year. When I found out how

unlikely it was that you would ever care to give up the child, I made up my mind that the truth must be told, and that I would give up all claim to my daughter if she preferred to continue with you. I waited until after the birthday party, so that I shouldn't spoil her happiness ; and on that very evening, if you remember, the news of the woman's death came."

" Yes, I remember."

" And you've been so out of sorts lately that I thought I'd wait till you were better. Then I decoyed you out here, do you see ?"

" Yes, it is indeed a strange story. And don't you ever paint now, Ackerman ?—I mean Arnold—I suppose I shall get used to it in time."

" No ; I gave it up when I left England. You know I was brought up as an architect——"

" Ah, then that accounts for your

knowledge in that way. I thought it odd that you should understand so well how to turn that ugly cottage into a habitable place. I'm afraid you're wasting a lot of money on our property."

"Never mind that! You know it was while learning architecture that I met Olivia; she was the daughter of the gentleman to whom I was articled, and I, a raw Yorkshire youth, just come up to London, fell madly in love with her at once. I had always declared my intention of being an artist; but my father, the owner of a small estate, and a practical man, laughed at such a notion. He wanted me to put my four thousand pounds, which was my share of my mother's property—there were three of us—into farming or some business; but finding I did not take to either, he apprenticed me to an architect in the hope that my artistic abilities and

tastes might be turned to good account. I suppose I did learn a little architecture at that time; but I know I learnt a great deal more about love. How I worshipped that sweet girl! Meadows, you described her exactly a few minutes back—you must indeed have admired her to portray her so perfectly. How strange that we should both have loved the same woman and hated the same woman! What mysterious link is there between us?"

"Ah! that is one of the puzzling things in this world! It can't be mere chance."

"I felt that I could not live without her. I very wickedly persuaded her to marry me secretly, for her father would not consent till, he said, he should see me well established in my profession. My little fortune was to come to me on my twenty-first birthday. A few weeks after that day I married. I tossed up

architecture and determined to devote myself to painting. I thought, with the interest of the four thousand and the sale of my pictures we could live, at any rate, in humble fashion for a time. I never doubted but I should make a name in time—and who knows, Meadows, but that I should, had she lived? One wants an incentive to ambition. You can't work for a woman—or rather a fiend like that—well we won't mention her again. At any rate I was full of hope. Of course I offended all my people, and Olivia offended all hers. But what was that when we were so happy with each other? Not to be extravagant we took a humble lodging in the north-west of London, and there I met that curse to my life—and yours."

"I wonder the woman dared to come down here and act out her lie!"

“Ah ! I should have thought this was the last place she would have come to, for she knew Olivia was buried here.”

“That clears up another point, Ackerman. When she was ill and delirious she mentioned the name of Olivia, and spoke of the cross. Afterwards when I asked her about it, and took her to the grave, she seemed as innocent of any knowledge of it as a perfect stranger might be.”

“She could act so well !”

“What a strange career for a woman ! She was companion to my aunt when I became acquainted with her.”

“Yes, she told me of that.”

“There’s a Mrs. Carey who keeps a lodging-house, who seems to be mixed up with her.”

“Yes, I think that was the name of the woman she lived with when Carstairs deserted her.”

“She seems a queer sort of character.”

“Very likely. She would hardly be friendly with such a woman if she were not queer.”

“And this man Carstairs seems to be a thorough scoundrel.”

“Yes, Meadows, I think we fell into a den of thieves?”

“And the sooner we get clear of them the better. But whatever in the world can Miss Green have to do with the man?”

“But is she connected with him?”

“Read the rest of this for yourself, and then read Broderick’s.”

“Arnold read both letters.

“Shameful!” he said, “frightening the poor child like that! I declare one ought to have the law on such people. I should say that poor old fool, Miss Green, has fallen in with this man Carstairs in some way, and they have

planned it together. Just as we were all out of the way too! She might have died of fright. We'll return at once, Meadows, of course, and put a stop to it."

"At once, as fast as train and boat will carry us. I've telegraphed already that I'm going back; now we'd better telegraph again and say something to relieve Pet's mind, eh? we must concoct something between us."

"By all means. Say, '*Whole story false, we are returning as quickly as possible to bring proofs*'—eh? Better not say too much, it might startle her."

"Yes; I think that will do. And we can telegraph from Dover what train they're to send the carriage to meet us. Then let's waste no time in getting this off."

"I declare, Meadows, you're in better spirits than you've been for a long time.

Here have I been waiting for fifteen months, dreading every day to tell you the news, and now I've told you, you're as lively as you can possibly be. What a pity I didn't tell you long ago!"

"You see, my dear fellow, I'm so delighted to think the little Olivia has her wishes so unexpectedly realised."

But although the Squire was in such good spirits, there was just a slight doubt in his mind—though very slight. At any rate, he said to himself he had a very delicate task in front of him, and a very short time in which to perform it.

CHAPTER X.

WHEN the Squire's telegram was received at Overton Hall, Miss Fanny Broderick was in a state of great excitement. She had intended travelling back to Lincolnshire the following day, but she felt that as matters stood she really must postpone her journey. The prospect of so much fun must not be missed. It was of Miss Green she was thinking. As to Pet's feeling about it of course she was very glad, and it was such a relief, as she said to Edith Courtley, that the family would not be compromised, but

at the same time Miss Green was uppermost in her thoughts.

The prospect of such dire confusion to her old enemy as this was likely to prove an agreeable sensation to her, and she looked forward to the return of her cousin with the utmost impatience.

That Miss Green should not be allowed to have a moment's peace of mind, Fanny addressed the following letter to her immediately after the receipt of the telegram :—

“ Dear Miss Green,

“ You are so much interested in the episode of Saturday afternoon that I thought you would like to have further news as soon as possible. It seems that the inebriated wretch who came here pretended that he was the father of Miss Meadows, and not only that, but he had the effrontery to cast a slur upon her

birth. She wrote immediately to my cousin on the subject, and he has telegraphed to say the story is entirely false, and that he is returning as quickly as possible with proofs of her birth. We have not yet heard whether the man is caught; but directly my cousin arrives no time will be lost in securing him, and also the woman who is acting with him. I thought this might interest you.

“ Very truly yours,

“ FANNY BRODERICK.”

“ I’ll tell you what, Edith,” said Fanny, when she had despatched her letter, for she said nothing about it till it was safely out of the house, “ it’s my opinion old green-eyes will make herself scarce in the village, and you’ll see nothing of her for some time.”

The following morning a telegram was

received from Dover ordering the carriage to meet the train which was due at Abington Station at 3.34. The parson went across to the stables, and told Keeley to call for him when he was ready to start.

“Squire’s coming back again very soon, Sir!” said the coachman. “Hope there’s nothing wrong, Sir.”

“No, Keeley, nothing particular; but perhaps you’ve heard some talk in the village about what happened on Saturday.”

“Well, Sir, there’s been a fine lot of talk about some gentleman as drove over here in a fly o’ Saturday. Some says as he was drunk; and some says as he was nearly murdered at the Hall; and some says as he’s my young lady’s own father as has come to claim to her; and some says as he was nothing more than a burglar as tried that way of walking off

with what he could lay hands on ; but it was strange as he found out just the time when my young lady was alone, Sir ; wasn't it ? And you out of the way too, Sir."

"I wish I'd caught the scoundrel, Keeley !"

"Ay ! so do I, Sir ! But he got it pretty hot, I hear, from some woman as was in the way."

"I don't think he was much hurt."

"Jim Burton, as drove him over, said he was swearing awful about it when he got back to Abington, and was drinking there at the Arms. He said he'd have the law of Squire, a-letting him be assaulted in his house."

"I think it's probable we shall have the law of him, Keeley, for the police are already communicated with."

"And a good thing, too, Sir."

In the afternoon the parson drove to

the station to meet the travellers. He was somewhat surprised to find Miss Green at the station, bustling about, evidently prepared for a journey.

“Oh, Mr. Broderick!” she said, in her blandest tones, “I’m so glad to have this opportunity of speaking to you before I go, for I had no time to call. I’ve heard from my aunt at Bath this morning that she’s feeling very ill; and as she’s very old and infirm, we fear lest something may happen to her, and she’s no one but her maid with her. So I’m hurrying off to look after her. I left a message with my sister for you. She’ll take my duties at the organ, and I’m sure she’ll be glad of any assistance from Miss Broderick.”

“My sister will be returning to Lincolnshire shortly; she was to have started to-day, but is waiting to see

Mr. Meadows, whom I am now expecting.”

“Dear me! he is returning very quickly! Are you expecting him by this train?”

“Yes, it is now due.”

“I go on by this, so I’ll go and see if my luggage is labelled. Good-bye, Mr. Broderick! I daresay I shall be back in a week! I hope my absence will not inconvenience you.”

The train came in, and presently the three friends were seated in the Squire’s carriage, the parson listening with astonishment to the story the Squire had to tell him; and Miss Green was flying away from Oakshire with a determination not again to enter the county till the unpleasant affair in which she had played a part was somewhat hushed up.

The carriage stopped at the Cot-

tage, where the three gentlemen got out.

“You can drive home, Keeley!” said the Squire. “We shall walk on.”

Mr. Arnold led the way into the house, and after asking the Squire and parson to wait a minute in the drawing-room, he ran up-stairs, and brought down three oil-paintings.

“Good heavens!” said the Squire, as he looked at the first, “how well I remember your painting that, with that sweet girl sitting by your side! Look Bart, it’s your church from the west side. I remember how I longed to come and look over your shoulder, and I didn’t dare to! Ah! Arnold, you don’t know how I envied you your wife!”

“And I envy you my daughter! For you know you’ve got her heart.”

“Do you know who this is?” said Arnold, holding up a portrait.

“Why, I declare it’s old John Tucker, and he looks just the same as ever! And that woman attempted to put him in broadcloth! Don’t you remember, Bart?”

“Yes,” said the parson, laughing.

“I’d give something to possess those two pictures. I should like to have them in memory of old times. I suppose you wouldn’t part with them.”

“We’ll divide them, Meadows! I can’t part with the church! But you may have the old fellow in his smock, if you like.”

“Thanks, old boy! it is good of you. Johnny must have a place of honour up at the Hall, and Johnny in the flesh must be rewarded for being so picturesque and giving me so much pleasure.”

“And this,” said Arnold, exhibiting a half-length, half life-size portrait, “of course you know. The miniature I copied from it after her death, that I might always carry it about.”

“Why, it’s Pet,” said the parson.

“No; her mother,” said the Squire.
“That was my ideal woman, Bart !”

“Lovely !” said the parson, standing enraptured before the picture.

“Now then, Bart !” said the Squire slapping him on the shoulder, “if you look so devotional as that I shall think you’re a Roman Catholic, worshipping a saint, eh ?”

“Beautiful !” said Bart turning away,
“exactly like her.”

“I’ve a host of family papers, and other things that may interest you, Meadows,” said Arnold, “but you can look at them at any time. I daresay Olivia will be anxiously

looking for you, so I won't keep you now."

"All right, my dear fellow : and mind," putting up his finger in warning, "you're not to appear at the Hall till dinner-time to-morrow ; but perhaps you'll see something of us before that, though I won't promise. I'll play the paternal part for one day longer. Come, Bart !"

"You seem in excellent spirits, Thorn !" said the parson directly they got out into the road. "I should have thought after setting your heart on the child as you did, you would regret parting with her. I've never seen you look so bright since the old days when we had no troubles, and I used to try and make them, eh ?"

"Bart, my dear boy, this little matter may end more pleasantly for me than for you. I've been burdened with a horrible secret for months ; how many I

can't say; I can't tell when the thing first grew on me, or when it assumed any shape. I couldn't tell you about it, Bart! It is the only thought of my life that I have kept from you, except when I made that foolish mistake. You don't know how I've suffered; and suffered the more because I couldn't mention it. Sometimes I've nearly broken out with it; but kept myself back just in time; for it would have burdened you as well as me! Can you guess it, old boy? Do you remember when we first began to teach Pet, you said it was a dangerous experiment, or something of that sort?"

"I found it so! But, Thorn!"—stopping suddenly and looking him in the face, "you don't mean to say that—that—"

"Yes, Bart, I do! I don't know how it happened any more than you did. Do

you remember how you appealed to me that night when you first told me of it, and said I could not understand what you felt? I was feeling every word intensely—”

“Poor Thorn !”

“And that was why I wanted you to ask her in such a hurry. I thought if she would have you I could better see her married to you than anyone else—”

“It was very noble of you, though !”

“No, it wasn’t! For do you know I waited in the most horrible suspense, and when you came in from the garden and told me of her refusal, you can’t think how I rejoiced secretly. That wasn’t noble at all, was it. I felt such a mean, wicked wretch.”

“And now—”

“Well, Bart, we stand on even ground. Either of us can ask her. It’s an awkward thing when two friends love

the same woman. One must be sacrificed, and—”

“I must be that one, of course, Thorn, for she probably loves you best. Though it seems an awkward thing to ask a girl to marry you after bringing her up to love you as a father.”

“It is an awkward thing, Bart.”

“Do you suppose she has ever guessed your feeling for her?”

“I can’t tell. I don’t think she has ever analysed the question of love at all. But I think she has such a very ardent affection for me, that she would never love anyone as well. Whether the love will develop passion I cannot tell. I feel that I have a very delicate task—”

“You have indeed!”

“After all, what a husband and wife want for good wear and tear in this world is true sympathy and affection, and these Pet and I shall always have for each

other. I think we may trust the rest to take care of itself."

"I hope it may be all right, Thorn. You've had so much trouble : you deserve happiness now."

"But remember, Bart, that you have as good a right to ask Pet as I have ; and if she loves you, I must give her up."

"I know it's useless, with such a rival. No, Thorn, if a woman must come between us, I am thankful that it's in the shape of such an angel as Pet ; though I have to give her up."

CHAPTER XI.

“WHY, Thorn!” said Fanny, as her cousin walked into the morning-room, “we’ve been wondering what had become of you; and thought you’d lost the train.”

“We dropped Ackerman at the Cottage, and Bart and I went in for a few minutes and then walked on. Where’s Pet? Is she all right?”

“Yes, she and Edith are out watching for you; they are sure to be somewhere between the house and the front gates. They thought of course you’d drive in.”

“No, I left Bart at the stable-gates, and thought I’d come in the shortest way. Have her fetched in, and tell her to come to my room !”

“What’s the news, Thorn? I do so want to know all about it. Who is the horrid man, and how came Miss Green mixed up with him, and is he any relation, and—”

“My dear inquisitive Miss Fan, you’ll have to wait a bit before your hundred and one questions are answered. I must have a long talk with Pet, and perhaps at dinner-time I shall astonish you with a little news. Send her in as soon as you can. She’ll find me in the study. I don’t want to be disturbed till dinner, do you hear, Fan?”

“Now, Thorn, that’s cruel after all this suspense.”

“Teach you a little patience, which you want, my dear. Perhaps you’ll

be interested to hear that Miss Green went on by the train that brought us. She's going to visit a relative at Bath. Perhaps you know something about it! Oh, you mischievous minx, Fan! Save your curiosity till seven o'clock, and send the child to me."

The Squire went to the study, where Pet presently joined him.

"Darling! Are you glad to see me again?" he said, as she flew to his arms.

"Oh, yes, papa! It has seemed such ages since you left! And I've been so frightened! I keep fancying I shall see him wherever I turn. But I'm safe now you've come back."

"Quite safe, dear. And what a poor little pale thin face it has! You'll get well now, darling, won't you? And I've such a lot of good news to tell you—

such a lot! I'm sure you'll be so happy."

"I shall if it makes you happy. Is it something that will make you look as you used to do when I was a little girl, and we were so happy?"

"Yes, Pet; at least that will depend on you. *You* have now the power to make me happy. Think of that, little one!"

"Then you may be quite sure I will, papa darling. And then shall you get quite well without going away and leaving me?"

"Yes, child: when I go away you can come too if you like: but I don't know whether you will. Perhaps when my little girl hears what I have to say she'll toss her head, and call papa an old fogey."

"As if I should!" she said, playing with his curls in the old way.

“Why, papa, I think you the handsomest, and wisest, and best, and altogether the beautifulest man that is in the world.”

“But that’s what you’ll have to think of your husband some day, little one; and he’d be very disappointed if you didn’t.”

“Then he’ll have to be disappointed, because I’m quite sure I shall never think anyone a half or quarter or anything like so good as you.”

“Your husband would be very jealous.”

“I can’t help that. I shall always love you best, because you have been everything to me. I’m so sorry you’ve had to come home for me, papa, because I know it was good for you to go; but I’m so glad for *my* sake you’ve come. I keep thinking I shall see that dreadful man. Oh, he was so horrible!” she covered her face with

her hands; "and I start up in the night dreaming about him."

"Don't be in the least bit frightened, dear Pet. I'm here now, and that man has nothing to do with you in any way. He's simply an impostor wanting money. If he hasn't run away by this time he will soon, for he'll fear being prosecuted."

"Who is he, papa?"

"He's a bad man who was connected in some way with the person we used to think was your mother, Pet dear."

"And wasn't she my mother?" said Pet, astonished.

"No; your mother, darling, lies under that little marble cross in the churchyard."

"Oh, papa! what, the pretty lady you loved so much?"

"Yes, my little Olivia."

“Olivia! Am I Olivia too?”

“Yes; I am thankful to say you are.”

“Oh, papa darling! how lovely! Oh, how strange! Fancy finding out that one is somebody else. It’s so funny! I can hardly understand it!” she said, putting her hands up to her temples as though her brain was confused.

“Yes; you are Olivia Arnold, darling. Try and realise that! You are exactly like her, my child.”

“How very funny! And *she* was good, wasn’t she, papa?”

“She was both good and beautiful, dear.”

“I wish I had known her!”

“She died when you were born; so the date on the tombstone is your birthday. You were seventeen last July.”

“Then now we know for certain?”

“Yes; and the oddest thing is, that while I have been wondering where I could get the certificate of your birth, it has been close to me in this parish all the time.”

“How funny!”

“Then, papa, who was my real father?” she said, sitting down on a hassock at his feet, and resting her hands on his knees.

“I’m afraid now I shall have to astonish you very much, Pet.”

“Was he good and right?” she said, looking up earnestly and seriously into his face. “Didn’t you tell me once about that lady and her husband?”

“Yes; very good and very noble, Pet.”

“Then I’ve no one to be ashamed of?”

“No one!”

“Oh, papa,” she said with a great

sigh of relief, "are you quite sure it's all true?"

"Quite!"

"And you don't say it only to make me happy?"

"Indeed not, my child. I shall have all the proofs ready for you."

"Oh, dear papa," she said, clasping her hands over his knees, "it seems too good to be true!"

Her eyes filled with tears of joy and thankfulness. She was unable to speak for some time, but sat with her head bent down on the Squire's knees.

"My dear girl!" he said, stroking the pretty brown hair, "I'm so glad to be able to tell you this. I know it will make you happier. But I should have loved you just the same had it not been so."

"And who was my father?" she said, looking up.

"He was an artist, darling."

"Oh, yes! I remember you told me he came down here to paint pictures."

"And he's alive, dear!"

"Alive, papa! Oh, how nice! But will he take me away from you?"

"That will depend on yourself, Pet."

"Oh, then of course he won't! I shall be very glad to see him, but I can't leave you, can I, darling papa? We've been such a long time together."

"Not if it was some one very nice indeed?"

"No: unless you wish it! But you won't send me away?"

"We must talk about that presently, darling. When I tell you that your father is some one you know and love perhaps you'll want to go to him."

"Some one I know!"

"Yes; and some one you love!"

"But I don't love anybody particu-

larly but you, and Cousin Bart, and Mr. Ackerman."

"Well!"

"Oh, papa, I believe I've guessed! Is it dear old Grandpapa Ackerman?"

"It is, darling. Ackerman Arnold his name is!"

"How delightful!" she said, clapping her hands. "There! I knew it by instinct, didn't I now? I shall be proud of him! And then I shall be able to see him just the same, and live here with you."

"But perhaps he won't agree to that, Pet, dear! He loves you very much, and has been waiting all this time for you, and was afraid to take you away from me!"

"Papa! but you said I shouldn't go!"

"Now I want you to be a very wise

little girl, Pet, and try to understand what I'm going to say."

"Yes, papa!"

"When people live together, dear, there is generally some tie between them. They are father and daughter, or brother and sister, or uncle and niece, or nephew and aunt, or—or any other relation you know—or—husband and wife, don't you see?"

"Well, you're papa, so it's all right, isn't it?"

"But then your own father wants you, and I've no excuse for keeping you——"

"Papa! please don't send me away."

"Unless——"

"Yes?" she said anxiously.

"Is there any other relation we could be to one another?"

She sat thinking for a moment.

“There’s Cousin Bart,” she said;
“couldn’t you be a cousin too?”

“I’m afraid that would hardly settle the difficulty, my child.”

She thought again for a moment.

“Would it be wrong for us to marry, papa? But then I’m not good enough for a wife for you!”

“Aren’t you?” he said, lifting her up from her seat. “Would my dear little girl like to become my wife?” kissing her so that she could not answer.

Do any moments fly so fast as those over which the little god Cupid presides? For how long did those two sit still contented to look into each others’ eyes, and remain silent?

Thornton Meadows was thirty-six years old, and in all his thirty-six years he had never known such happiness as he was now realising. His strong arms clasped the beautiful girl, and she felt

that she was safe now—now, and always. She trembled with a new feeling, which she had never before known, and which, though it caused her to cling more closely than ever to the man who had always been her idol, brought no terror with it.

The light had been gradually fading ; but darkness does not trouble lovers. They were startled by the first dinner bell.

“How the time has flown !” said the Squire in a low voice trembling with emotion. “Olivia, darling, we must go and dress. Don’t let them ask you anything before dinner, or see you even. Stay in your room till the second bell rings, and I’ll come and fetch you ; I want to surprise them.”

“Very well, papa, I’ll dress myself, and keep the door locked. I shall never

get out of the way of calling you papa, you know !”

“Never mind if you don’t, darling ! It will come in very well when there are some little ones about.”

“Oh, you funny papa ! That won’t be for ever so long !”

“I don’t see why ! We must talk to Papa Arnold about it ; by the way, he’ll come in very well as grandpapa also, Olivia, won’t he ? And I think if we just keep it a secret from everyone else, and you go and live with him till after Christmas time——”

“But then I shall have to leave you !”

“Only for three months ! Don’t you see, darling, that your poor father has been longing to have you, and was noble enough to wait, because he thought I could not part with you. Now if you go, to live with him for a little

time it will make him happy, and I can come and claim you quite in the orthodox fashion! Ask papa! you know," said the Squire, laughing.

"Oh, yes!" she said, "that will be nice!"

"And then I shall have this dull old house freshened up, and make it worthy of its beautiful little mistress."

"I don't mind the house if I can have *you* always!"

"And we shall have your father near us, and Cousin Bart——"

"Dear Cousin Bart!"

"I've told him what I was going to do to-day, so he'll know the secret."

"Was he sorry?"

"I told him he had the same chance as myself with you, and that if he liked to try——"

“Ah! but when he asked me I said I could not leave you.”

“And you’re quite sure, Olivia, that——”

As several more minutes were wasted or rather spent in kisses and assurances, there was but little time left for the Squire to get into his evening dress, or for Pet to put on the pretty things which the maid had laid out in her room.

The second bell had rung some time before they appeared. The parson, Fanny Broderick, and Miss Courtley were waiting in the drawing-room.

“How late they are!” said the impatient Fanny, “and I call it cruel when there’s so much to hear. Only fancy that old green-eyes rushing off in a hurry, Edith! I told you she would.

You won't see anything of her for some time, I can tell you! Mind you don't forget to tell me about it when you write! I'm sure the village ought to get up a testimonial to me for getting rid of her for a time, and you ought to promote it, Bart!"

"Oh, Fanny! you're too fond of revenge!" said her brother.

"Now, Bart, just you tell the truth! Aren't you glad to get rid of her?"

"Miss Green's absence is certainly a relief, but——"

"Miss Courtley! Fanny! Bart!" said the Squire, appearing at the door, "allow me to introduce you to Miss Olivia Arnold, daughter of our good friend Arthur Ackerman Arnold!"

Miss Fanny Broderick's astonishment can be left to the imagination of the reader, who may be certain that she

tasted not a mouthful of her dinner till she had asked numberless questions, and had been put in possession of all the facts.

CHAPTER XII.

THE Squire in the enjoyment of his newly found happiness forgot entirely to look what letters had come for him during his absence. It was not till the next morning, when the post arrived, bringing a second letter from Mrs. Carey, that it occurred to him there might be others waiting for him. He found a small pile on his study-table, Mrs. Carey's first production, that had been so carefully penned, amongst them.

This served to explain the second, which had at first puzzled him. The second ran as follows ; punctuation being

added to make it clear, for it was written without stops of any kind.

“ Dear Sir,

“ Since I wrote to you on Sunday I am sorry to say Captain Cartairs has been in a very bad way, and been removed to the hospital in delirium tremens. When he first got delirious he talked a great deal about some money he expected from Overton, which confirmed my suspicions that he had been down to see you. As I have not heard from you, I suppose you are away, or else you have settled with the Captain, which he did not inform me of. I have sent round to the place where he has his letters addressed, and I enclose one from a person named Green, who seems to be very intimate with him.

“ She appears to live near you, and know all about your affairs, and the Captain’s

too, which shows the Captain has not kept the secret. Perhaps you know this person. I hope you will not think that I have had anything to do with the Captain letting out the secret. I have done all I can to keep him quiet, but drink is his curse, and I suppose he let it out when he was drunk. I have already supplied him, as I told you in my last letter, with a good deal of cash, as I would not trouble you, and I am very much out of pocket by him, which I hope you will consider, as it is just quarter-day, and my rent to pay, and I did it to keep the secret.

“Very truly yours,

“LAURA CAREY.

P.S.—The person named Green might like to be informed that Captain Carstairs is a married man.—L. C.”

“Ah ! Madam Carey,” said the Squire ;

“your little game is pretty well played out. My solicitor will silence you.”

The truth was that Mrs. Carey, finding the Captain reduced to such an abject condition, kept him completely under her thumb, as it were. He was too weak to leave her house, and she thought if he was carefully nursed and fed on mild food, and kept from any alcoholic fluid, he would be very much better. This treatment, however, developed delirium tremens, and she was obliged to have him removed. He was much too sly to let her know where he had his letters addressed; but when he talked in his delirium so much about a letter containing money, she managed to make him disclose the address. She was very angry at finding Miss Green's letter, for more reasons than one. She wanted to keep the secret in consideration of what it

might bring her ; and although she had no love for the Captain, still she fancied that she was the only woman he admired at present.

At any rate, he was the only man who made any pretence of admiring her, for she was a slovenly, faded, middle-aged woman, who had not the least charm of mind or character to take the place of the beauty of person that had long ago departed. So there was just a touch of jealousy concerning the "person named Green," for, so far as Mrs. Carey knew, Miss Green might be a young and lovely woman. That accounted for his long absence, thought Mrs. Carey.

The Squire was certainly not a man who cared to stoop to petty revenge ; and the first thought that occurred to him after seeing Miss Green's letter was that she ought to be properly warned of the danger she was incurring by making

acquaintance with Captain Carstairs. But the Squire's sense of humour rather overcame his better thoughts on this occasion. He could not help smiling, now that everything had ended so happily for him, at the way in which Fanny had brought about a hasty retreat on the part of Miss Green.

Fanny had of course related the whole affair, omitting only her own disgust when she thought she should be called upon to acknowledge as her cousin an illegitimate child.

"Fan!" he said, "here's a letter of Miss Green's which ought, I think, to be returned to her, as she would scarcely like it to be falling into anyone's hands. The accompanying letter explains why it has been sent to me. You seem to manage the old lady better than anyone else; perhaps you'll write to her."

“Oh!” said Fanny, almost screaming with delight, “fancy the old thing being so sentimental, and carrying on with that wretch! And he’s got delirium tremens, too! that’s a very awful thing, isn’t it, Thorn? what people have when they’ve been drinking. I think I’ll settle her now, Thorn! I don’t believe she’ll come back again for a year, if at all! And the wretch was married, too, all the time! ‘Person named Green,’ indeed! At any rate, I shall go away with the conviction that I’m leaving dear old Bart in quiet possession of his parish.”

When Thornton Meadows had written such letters as were necessary, he went with Olivia to the Cottage.

They went through the copse arm-in-arm as they had so often done, with Laddie following and kicking up the fallen leaves for very joy; for he quite

understood what his young mistress had told him that morning, that they were all going to be very happy again, and that they would always take great care of him, because he was such an old friend, and had been with them in all their troubles.

The recent fright and troubles had made Olivia pale and thin ; but the walk in the crisp autumnal air brought colour to her cheeks, and the new love that had sprung up in her heart gave a light to her eyes, so that when she reached the Cottage she was looking as lovely as ever.

“ Dear grandpa,” she said, running up to her father, who was loitering in the garden.

“ My child ! my Olivia !” said her father, embracing her.

“ You see I’ve brought her to you, Arnold,” said the Squire presently, as

the father and daughter stood holding hands and looking at one another in sheer delight. "She's your property now; but I wonder what you'll say if somebody asks for her very soon. You know you can't expect to keep such a pretty flower all to yourself. You'll have to give her up some day, and I know some one who's in a hurry to take her. I thought it better to tell you at once, before she takes deep root here, you know; eh, Arnold?"

"I did hope to have my little daughter all to myself for a time," said Arnold, smiling sadly; "but if she wants to run away from me," laying his hand on her shoulder and looking into her face, "I suppose she must. I only hope she isn't going far. Is it Mr. Broderick, who——"

"No," said the Squire, "Broderick is not the lucky man. Don't you remember,

Arnold, you once did me the honour to mistake me for the husband of Olivia? That emboldens me to suppose I don't look such a very old fogey. Can you really imagine me in such a relationship? Will you give Olivia to me?"

"Meadows, you astonish me! I never thought of it in that light. I imagined you loved her as a father."

"Arnold!" said the Squire, grasping the hand that was held out to him in token of assurance, and speaking in a low tone, "now you can guess how I've suffered lately, and what made me look so ill. Now you understand why I reproached you for not telling me about it sooner!"

"How strange!" said Arnold. "To think all this time I have been envying you! Well, I could not wish her better off. My dear girl," he said, putting his

arm round her, "I don't want to lose you so soon after finding you, but I could not wish you a better husband."

"I'm so glad, grandpa," said Olivia. "But you know I'm coming to live with you for a little time; I'm going to sleep here to-night, if you'll let me, and papa will send my things, won't you?"

"Don't put yourself out, my dear," said Arnold, "do as you like about it."

"But I shall like it very much. I'm very proud to have such a nice father; so proud you can't think! and I want to learn all about my mother."

"God bless you, my child, and give you a longer life than your poor mother had! I can't begrudge her to you, Meadows," he said, turning to the Squire, "for you've made her what she is."

“I only did it to serve myself, and shut out grim despair ; so I’m not entitled to thanks, old boy.”

“I shall always be near you, grandpa,” said Olivia, “shan’t I ? unless you want to go away.”

“Well, I suppose that will depend on you. You’ll be my little landlady now, eh ? Perhaps you’ll turn me out.”

“Oh, fancy being your landlady ! What fun !”

CHAPTER XIII.

HAD Thornton Meadows been allowed to do as he liked he would probably have been married by a registrar, and with as little ceremony as possible. But there was a whole army of objectors, with Keziah and Fanny Broderick at the head—or rather Mrs. Charles Cornthwaite; for Fanny had been four months married. It was Keziah's opinion that unless "Squire had parson to bind them, and herself to say the Amens, there'd be no luck in it."

"Fuss, indeed, Sir!" she said to her master, when she heard that the Squire

wanted to be married "without fuss:" "better have the fuss now nor after. There's never no luck comes to them as goes off and gets married on the sly. The Lord's blessing ain't on it, as we're told in the Bible, Sir! And Squire too, as he's a great man, and ought to do it grand and proper-like. He don't think enough of himself, Squire don't, Sir, and he don't keep his place like. He makes too much of us poor folk, and talks to us as if we were brothers and sisters, bless his 'art, and I do love him, that I do. But I want to see him 'old up 'is 'ead, I do, and be a grand gentleman, not let Farmer Kemington and sich like get above him. 'Cos you see, Sir, we must have high and low, and we can't be all alike."

"Very true, Keziah! the chief thing is to do our duty, whether we be high or whether we be low."

“And quite right too, Sir: and I’m sure as I does mine, with the Lord’s help, Sir. And as I was a-saying, Sir, I think Squire’s just about doing the thing he did ought to have done a long time ago. We want a real lady at the Hall, and not a waiting-woman—”

“Now, Keziah!”

“Well, Sir, she turned out a bad lot, as you must own. I was right, Sir, and young miss, she *is* a lady, as anyone might see, and good family too, from up in your own parts as I’ve heard tell, and that’s jest what it ought to be, and I hopes as they’ll be blessed with a large family, Sir, and then Squire ’ll live proper and reg’lar like.”

Such was Keziah’s opinion on the subject.

Fanny, who did not forget to make a grand flourish of her dignity and experience as a married woman, expressed

her opinion, and offered her advice very freely. She hoped, she said, that Thorn “after his bitter experience would for once put aside all ridiculous affectation, and act as a gentleman of his position should do. She should not for her part consider the wedding ceremony complete unless her dearest Charlie were asked to assist at it.”

So the Squire had to give way and allow people to make as much fuss as they liked.

Fanny, with her dearest Charlie, and a married sister with her husband, and an unmarried sister, all arrived together at the Hall, where Miss Courtley acted for the present as mistress. Fanny was of opinion that Thornton's sisters and their husbands, and Miss Arabella, should also be asked; but her knowledge of their enmity to the Broderick family allowed her to acquiesce with Thornton,

who was not anxious to see his relations. And so it came to pass one fine morning, when the earth was gay with golden crocus, and the air blithe with the songs of amorous birds, that Fanny Broderick went bustling down to the church to see that all was ready, and to arrange the book-markers in the marriage service for her dearest Charlie.

Keziah, who had rubbed up the commandments till they shone, and had laid a crimson cloth on the old damp memorial stones in the aisle, was still walking about with a duster to see if she could catch a speck of dirt anywhere.

“ Well, Miss Fanny—begging your pardon, I mean Mrs. Charles, ma’am—” said old Keziah, “ it’s all right and proper this time.”

“ Yes. I’ve taken good care of that, Keziah.”

“And a blessed thing for all of us, too, for I’m sure as how Squire ’as been like a-hidin’ his head all these years, with that hateful woman for his wife, which she was no wife at all, as I’ve heard.”

“No, she wasn’t by rights.”

“And I’m sure when young miss is the Squire’s lady, she’ll make Squire ride in his carriage and be the fine gentleman.”

“Well, I’m sure he’s having enough done for her, for the Hall is going to be done up most beautifully—perfectly lovely it will be, Keziah.”

“Will it now?”

“Yes: and I must come to see it when it’s finished. I really *must*.”

“Of course you must, ma’am; and your reverend gentleman will have to come and help at the christening, which

I warrant me we shall be having before the year's out."

"We'll see about that when the time comes, Keziah, but I don't mean to wait for that. Besides, I may be wanted before then for another wedding."

"Another wedding?"

"Yes; I shouldn't be a bit surprised if my brother and Miss Courtley made a match of it, now that Miss Courtley is going to live at the Hall, and help look after the parish instead of that odious old green-eyes."

"Good Lord, miss!" said Keziah, holding up her hands, duster and all, and looking as though she would ask Heaven to avert such a thing.

"And a very good match too, Keziah; don't you think so?"

"But Parson's too good to be married."

"Well, I call that good!" said Fanny, laughing out loudly. "That's the best

thing I've heard for a long time. Why, Keziah, anyone would think it was a dreadful punishment to a man to be married."

"Dear Parson! It'll break my heart if ever I have to leave him."

"Of course you won't, Keziah."

"But Miss Courtley, ma'am! I'm rather frightened of her, she's so mighty clever like. Lord bless and preserve dear Parson!"

"I believe the fact is, Keziah, you wan't to keep him all to yourself."

"Well, it *is* comfortable like, ma'am, with Parson, and I don't fancy him like with children about the place."

"At any rate, if he marries Miss Courtley, he'll never be bothered again with that horrid old green-eyes, Keziah, who used to worry him so; in fact, I shouldn't wonder if she never comes

back, though she's impudence enough for anything."

"Only to think, ma'am, that gentlefolks should ever bemean themselves to do as she did, and all to try and hurt that sweet young lady."

"Well, Keziah, I must be running back to dress, and you've got to get your new gown on. I want you particularly to see that my brother has a glass of wine before he comes out, for it's cold, and—and—well, he might be a little nervous, you know, as it's a marriage in his own family."

"Yes, bless his 'art; he have always loved Squire as if he was his own brother, and as to young miss, why, he dotes the ground she walks on—and no wonder, for she's a angel if ever there was one, and if I was Squire I should be frightened she was going to die, as all those beautiful young ladies does."

“Nonsense, Keziah, she’s just about the same as other girls,” said Fanny, severely.

“Here’s the snowdrops, ma’am, ready for the children to strew under her feet,” said Keziah, as they were passing the church door. “They looks just like young miss herself, so white and innocent and tender-like, and ready to snap off if you ain’t careful in handling them.”

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The snowdrop has evidently not been subjected to rough treatment, for it has not snapped off. And Aunt Arabella’s prophecy of evil to the house of Meadows when the direct line should cease, has not any immediate prospect of being fulfilled, for Overton Hall is at present dominated by a little bundle of humanity, who can count on at least four most faithful slaves, besides being an object of earnest solicitude to Laddie, who sits

watching him with melancholy brown eyes : and a subject of daily conversation with Keeley, who has already conferred on him the title of “the young master.” His grandfather and father are quite convinced that he inherits the beauty of his mother and grandmother ; while his mother has not a doubt that he will be as wise as his father and grandfather : and his Cousin Bart, who is already engaged to be his tutor when the time for learning shall come, says he hopes he may be as beautiful as his mother and as clever as his father.

“And as good as yourself, Bart,” said the Squire.

THE END.

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